

Abstract

Greening America's Virtues

Nicholas S. Mather, Regis University

It is well-documented that the United States is one of the primary contributors to the climate emergency. Citizens have arguably embraced the virtues of the market—greed, envy, gluttony, wastefulness, and self-indulgence—all considered vices by any other measure—which drive the crisis and threaten to transform the American dream into a global nightmare. The American political response has been woefully insufficient in responding to the emergency, as dialogue has been stuck in a quagmire of party lines and ideologies. And yet, there is a possible solution, which is to draw from a shared tradition of virtue that runs through American political, religious, and environmental history.

From the arrival of the first colonists to the closing of the twentieth century Americans cultivated a tradition of virtue as they cultivated the land and forged a nation out of the wilderness. The nation was founded as a republic which was to rest on the bedrock of a virtuous citizenry. Examining the virtues of the American republican tradition alongside the religious and environmental history of the United States, reveals a connection between religion, republic, and nature. In this presentation, I will draw from the writings of American politicians

and intellectuals including Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter to identify core American virtues. These virtues include: benevolence, caring, charity, civil disobedience, civic participation/citizenship, cleanliness, commitment, compassion, conservation, fortitude, friendliness, frugality, gratitude, honesty, hope, humility, justice, kindness, love, loyalty, moderation, optimism, patience, patriotism, preservation, resourcefulness, respect, restraint, self-improvement, self-sufficiency, sincerity, simplicity, and solidarity. By excavating this American tradition of virtue, I will explore how this can inform an environmental virtue ethic.

Environmental virtue ethics is the attempt to identify the norms of character that should guide human interaction with the environment. Environmental virtue ethicists have primarily focused on extending classical virtues such as gratitude, compassion and moderation to environmental concerns. However, the possibility of deriving environmental virtues from civic virtues, or connecting environmental virtue to a political theory has been, with few exceptions, widely ignored. In the classical republican tradition, virtuous citizens were viewed as necessary for the creation of a just political community. Republicanism and environmentalism share similar ends—the flourishing of the individual, the polis and the land that supports both. As the practice of virtue is necessary condition for a just government so it is in achieving environmental justice. Given that virtue is a necessary requirement for the success of a republic and that virtue is a primary component of environmental ethics, its absence in political and ethical debates surrounding environmental issues is surprising.

Virtue is also a key feature in the world's religious traditions. Although there is a separation of church and state in the United States, the founders recognized the importance of religion in instilling into the citizenry the virtues necessary for the success of the republic. As such, virtue can act as a bridge between religion and politics, and open dialogue across party lines and interreligious communities. Furthermore, cultivating these virtues increases the possibility of citizens living flourishing lives as well as providing the foundation for a political system which supports individual well-being, and social and environmental justice.