intersections

Research Review

Electric Salvation

August 30, 2024

Electricity can save us from the climate emergency. This is an article of faith for those seriously committed to decarbonizing the world's energy system.

Why? Electricity is the only viable alternative energy infrastructure that exists globally today. It has co-existed and co-evolved with fossil fuels for over a century in most parts of the world. Its ubiquity offers cost and infrastructural advantages that other aspirational replacements (hello, hydrogen) could only dream of. And although it is possible to generate electricity from fossil fuels, they are far from the only option. So, if we follow the mantra to "electrify everything" in terms of energy-hungry pursuits like household climate, transportation and industrial production, while, at the same time, transitioning electricity generation from fossil to renewable energy resources, we knock out almost three-quarters of the source of greenhouse gas emissions in one fell swoop.

Colorful Light Streaks by photoGraph via Pexels

The charisma of electricity is building and slowly extending from expert cultures into culture at large. As more and more people follow scientists, activists and some governments and choose heat pumps for their homes, electric vehicles for their transportation and solar generation and battery storage technology for their roofs and garages, electric salvation edges ever nearer.

> ***But as the electrify everything mission has gained traction and speed, as phaseouts of internal combustion engines and home gas lines have become more common, electrification has also been drawn into culture wars that at their root are moral (in a Durkheimian sense), and therefore as much spiritual as they are secular. The friction concerning energy transition has everything to do with the rising moral power of electricity confronting the established moral power of fossil fuels.***

Imagining Electricity

This is not to say that the moral power of electricity is something new, far from it. As the science and engineering of electromagnetism evolved over the course of the 19th century, electricity infiltrated the moral imagination in a variety of ways. American Spiritualists of the mid 19th century, for example, considered electricity a medium or bridge through which spirits could pass into the physical plane.[1] Electricity "was the very principle of motion itself, an immanent dynamism that raised all matter to higher states."[2] This was part of a general redefinition of "energy" during the 19th century. Scholars such as Catherine Albanese, Cara Daggett and Terra Rowe have explored how energy came to be aligned with the presence of divinity on earth, inciting human work and technological progress to combat cosmic entropy and as a means of revelation and spiritual communication.[3] Although energy histories of the 19th century typically emphasize the rise of fossil fuels, it is important to recognize that electricity was also a key presence in the cultural imagination of modern energy.[4]

By the late 19th century, electricity was appreciated as a fundamental force shaping all aspects of life. David Nye has written of how cities across the world experienced an "electrical sublime" associated with artificial illumination and the apparent technological triumph of human ingenuity over the natural rhythm of night and day.[5] Durkheim himself equated religious energy with electrical force:

> ***"The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation."[6]***

Before the apparatus of large-scale oil extraction developed in the early decades of the 20th century, electricity (in alliance with the powers of coal, water and steel) represented the engine of modernity. Studies of 20th century electrification from across the world confirm that the sublime character of electrical modernity was experienced widely, if not always evenly.[7]

Source: Sasan Rashtipour via Unsplash

At the same time, electricity retained its ontological mysteries. Electricity was more than the mechanisms its enabled. It did not transcend the material world so much as it appeared to represent the cosmic glue holding things together. We now know, for example, that we have electromagnetic fields to thank for making the vast empty space within our atoms and

bodies seem solid and whole. As one science writer put it, “Not only is it possible that the human body creates EM fields — it is the only way you can possibly exist as a coherent entity! You are an electric field — a giant electric field which holds your atoms together, and which uses other electric fields to talk to other bits of yourself.”[8] Such a description can only leave the reader in awe of the ontological power of electromagnetism. The human domestication of electromagnetism (that is, electricity) seems nothing less than a taproot to infinitude.

The Sacrality of Oil

The road to electric salvation would thus seem to be an obvious one. And perhaps it would be but for the presence of oil, a materiality with its own sacred power. Darren Dochuk has written of the intimate entanglement of oil prospecting and evangelical Christianity especially in the southern and western United States.[9] Late 19th and early 20th century oil hunters embraced “embraced a high-risk, high-reward entrepreneurialism in hopes of achieving a prosperity that could signal their blessedness and allow them to save society in anticipation of the end times.”[10] The search for oil was a quest for encounter with an active Creator. Finding oil was a sign of grace. And the use of oil, like other applications of energy, was an invitation to participate in the advancement of God’s will on Earth. Modernizing liberal evangelicals like John D. Rockefeller believed that “godly capitalists would honor the principles of efficiency and control.”[11] Exuberant evangelical wildcatters meanwhile pursued the more ancient Lockean liberal injunction for white Christians to conquer new lands and subjugate Indigenous peoples to develop their otherwise wasted resources. Everywhere, oil became a kind of “civil religion” according to Dochuk.[12]

Zbynek Burival via Unsplash

That religion endures today, perhaps more powerfully in oil-rich states than others. As more and more evidence of the catastrophic environmental impacts of burning fossil fuels appears, oil is quickly losing whatever secular moral authority it once had. But its evangelical power endures. Scott Pruitt, a former Baptist deacon and EPA Administrator under Donald Trump, argues that we must support oil as a matter of creation care, "The biblical worldview with respect to these issues is that we have a responsibility to manage and cultivate, harvest the natural resources that we've been blessed with to truly bless our fellow mankind."[13] Of course, such a moral position relies on denying climate change as curse to mankind, minimizing the role fossil fuels have played in climate change, and/or a reveling in climate apocalypse as accelerant toward End Times. In the kaleidoscope of conservative religious media today, one can find these sentiments expressed many times over.

A New Civil Religion

Where does this leave our warming world? Secular and religious liberals alike tend to sacralize technology and enterprise as the only possible means toward exiting the Anthropocene. But one does not have to be a cynic to be skeptical that technology and enterprise will be capable of solving problems that technology and enterprise have wrought. It seems clear that the civil religion of oil needs to end. Scientific challenges to that religion have assuredly shaken some among the faithful. Other followers may need a different kind of persuasion. We might take heart from Durkheim that religion itself constantly transforms—"there is something eternal in religion that is destined to outlive the succession of particular symbols in which religious thought has clothed itself."[14]

Zoltan Tasi via Unsplash

In the spirit of religious succession, why not work at enchanting electricity further? At the moment we have small cults of electric faithful, many of them clustering in the cultures of expertise surrounding energy transition. But I would argue that we don't yet have a civil religion of electricity, at least not one strong enough to displace the civil religion of oil. We need something more on the scale of a charismatic movement and it may yet happen. The roots of electric imagination run deep. And what could be more sacred than the force holding all atoms and living things together? The combined power of oil's many machines pales in comparison. The creative among us electrophiles might devote more attention to engaging the mysteries of electromagnetism, pursuing experiments in popularizing electric faith. Meanwhile, we can and must continue the incremental but necessary work of disenchanting oil as an instrument of divine will. Zoe Todd has asked what it means to "live in a society that digs up dead ancestors and weaponizes them in the anti-reciprocal-relational machine that is capitalism"[15] (2023). Several centuries deep into the Capitalocene, it is clear that oil signals the accumulation of death in more senses than one; we must regard its civil religion more as a death cult than as a gospel of prosperity.[16]

Footnotes

[1] John W. Caterine, *Spiritualism, Mesmerism and the Occult, 1800–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2] Caterine, *Spiritualism, Mesmerism and the Occult*, 378.

[3] Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American*

Metaphysical Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Cara New Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Terra S. Rowe, "Entangled Energy: Religion, Materialism, and Climate Justice," unpublished manuscript.

[4] Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

[5] David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

[6] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 217.

[7] Coleman, *The Electrification of Modernity: Germany, America, and the Making of Universal Infrastructure*, (2017); Tanja Winther, *The Impact of Electricity: Development, Desires and Dilemmas* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

[8] Sarah Fraser, "The Electric Human: You Are Your Electromagnetic Field," *Science Unbound* (2017).

[9] Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

[10] Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 154.

[11] Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 225.

[12] Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 300.

[13] Jonathan Allen, “Scott Pruitt: God Mandates We Use Oil and Gas,” *NBC News* (January 24, 2018).

[14] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 429.

[15] Zoe Todd, “Living in a Society That Digs Up Dead Ancestors,” *Anthropocene and More-than-Human Perspectives* (2023).

[16] Dominic Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

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