



A Cross of Green? Reflections on Eco-Theology

By Steven F. Hayward

Growing evangelical interest in environmental issues has made news headlines in recent months. This Outlook reflects on the inherent difficulties of this dialogue and speculates on what environmentalists and evangelical Christians can learn from each other.

With all of the current talk about the “Death of Environmentalism,”¹ it should not come as a surprise that some environmentalists are reaching out to people who specialize in resurrections. “The Greening of Evangelicals: Christian Right Turns, Sometimes Warily, to Environmentalism,” the *Washington Post* reported in a page-one story in February. The *New York Times* was not far behind, with a March 10 story entitled “Evangelical Leaders Swing Influence Behind Effort to Combat Global Warming.”

The potential union of evangelicals, who voted for Bush by a four-to-one margin, and environmentalists, who voted for Kerry by a four-to-one margin, is the perfect man-bites-dog story for the media. Both camps are wary at their unlikely common cause. There is a fitting symmetry to the suspicions each camp holds of the other, which can be reduced to the common theme of fundamentalism. The phenomenon of fundamentalist Christianity is well-known; the phenomenon of what might be called “fundamentalist environmentalism” is equally applicable (we have alternately called it “romantic environmentalism” in previous editions of *Environmental Policy Outlook*) but less clearly recognized in the media and elsewhere.

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Suspicion and Apocalyptic Visions

Environmentalists are put off by excesses of fundamentalist Christianity’s doctrines of the last things (or “end times”), which to environmentalists suggests an indifference to the fate of nature. Evangelicals recoil from fundamentalist environmentalism’s exaltation of nature above man and God or the explicit substitution of nature for God. Of course, both varieties of fundamentalism represent distinct minority positions within each creed. But as is often the case with extreme positions, these fundamentalist strains tend to attract disproportionate attention and wrongly come to define the whole of a movement in the public mind. The tentative collaboration of evangelicals and environmentalists may provide a path out of the rut of current popular environmental discourse, especially as Christian teaching about nature—even the much derided fundamentalist variety—offers a corrective for the errors of fundamentalist environmentalism.

It will not be a quick or easy path, as a survey of the opening positions shows. Richard Cizik, leader of the 30-million-member National Association of Evangelicals, has embraced global warming as a cause but also told *The New York Times Magazine*: “A lot of conservative evangelicals have a problem with the environmental movement. I don’t call myself an environmentalist. Some environmentalists are pantheists who believe creation itself is holy, not the Creator.”² Cizik is clearly on to something here. How often have we heard

environmentalists and newspaper editorials refer to the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, an aesthetically barren stretch of land by human sensibilities, as a “cathedral” of nature, implying that a duty of worship should enjoin any human use of the land? Cizik and other green evangelicals prefer to call their enthusiasm “creation care,” which *The New York Times Magazine* noted sounds more like a division of Medicare. As the *Washington Post* notes, however, the term “does not annoy conservative Christians for whom the word ‘environmentalism’ connotes liberals, secularists and Democrats.”³

Environmentalists and liberals are quick to reciprocate this wariness. In 1967 Lynn White argued in *Science* magazine that Christianity was responsible for our environmental crisis because of its anthropocentrism.⁴ While this theory has receded from view, environmentalists remain concerned by Christian eschatology. Glenn Scherer of the popular online site Grist.com wrote last fall:

Many Christian fundamentalists feel that concern for the future of our planet is irrelevant, because it has no future. They believe we are living in the End Time, when the son of God will return, the righteous will enter heaven, and sinners will be condemned to eternal hellfire. They may also believe, along with millions of other Christian fundamentalists, that environmental destruction is not only to be disregarded but actually welcomed—even hastened—as a sign of the coming Apocalypse.⁵

This theme was also embraced by Bill Moyers, who joined Scherer in pointing to the urban legend of James Watt, who, according to Moyers and Scherer, “told the U.S. Congress that protecting natural resources was unimportant in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. In public testimony he said, ‘after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.’”⁶ The problem with this story is that it is untrue; Watt never said this or anything like it. Both Moyers and Grist.com issued corrections and apologies to Watt.⁷

But the image of evangelical eschatological indifference to the environment is persistent. Jared Diamond writes in his new bestseller *Collapse*: “The CEO and most officers of one of the major American mining companies are members of a church that teaches that God will soon arrive on Earth, hence if we can just postpone land reclamation for another 5 or 10 years it will then be irrelevant

anyway.”⁸ Diamond identifies neither the mining company nor the denomination in question here and has not answered queries from this author asking for details.

Urban legends get started with such unsubstantiated claims. Precisely because Diamond is a bestselling author of considerable reputation, his distortion or invention of ridiculous quotations threatens to inject them into wider circulation. In fact, it has already started. Reviewing *Collapse* in *Science* magazine, Tim Flannery writes of “the CEO of an American mining company who believes that ‘God will soon arrive on Earth, hence if we can just postpone land reclamation for another 5 or 10 years it will then be irrelevant anyway.’”⁹ Suddenly we have gone from executives who attend an unidentified congregation that believes this to a CEO who believes this. The next short step will be directly attributing this non-quotation to the unnamed CEO.

It is beyond doubtful that any major Christian denomination believes as a matter of doctrine the ridiculous views Diamond describes. To paraphrase Orwell, only a university professor could believe such nonsense. In the age of journalistic frauds such as Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* and Stephen Glass at *The New Republic*, no magazine or newspaper would print Diamond’s speculations on miners’ theology without sources. Diamond owes it to his readers, and the mining company executives in question, to come clean with specifics about who supposedly said this and what denomination holds these views so that other journalists can verify the story. Either Diamond was had by some woolly faculty club chatter, or he fabricated another shameful slander reminiscent of the Watt remark.

To the contrary, we should not be in the least surprised to find serious environmental concern among evangelical Christians, for the simple reason that the same quality of sin that afflicts the souls of men extends also to man’s dominion over the earth. The estrangement of man from God that comes with the Fall also includes a partial estrangement from nature. The command of stewardship that comes with the grant of dominion in Genesis clearly implies responsibility toward the earth—not the casual indifference suggested in the frothy caricatures of Moyers, Scherer, and Diamond. By contrast, consider the following passage:

The population explosion applies tremendous pressure. Along with this goes total ecological destruction. We must not kid ourselves. We are in trouble. Not only Lake Erie is dead. Lake Geneva is sick.

The ocean is dying. There is ecological pressure and the thinkers of the world are frightened about what is coming next. Read the papers carefully and you will see that, in ways open or not so open, the idea is being put forward that the only way to deal with the population explosion and the ecological problem is by an important curtailing of liberty.¹⁰

This passage reads as though it could have come from the pen of Paul Ehrlich or the Club of Rome, but the author was Francis Schaeffer, one of the leading evangelical social thinkers of the 1970s and a special favorite of conservative Christians. Clearly evangelicalism is no barrier to environmental consciousness. (Indeed, a survey of 125 church-related colleges taken in the 1980s found that 95 percent offered courses on environmental topics.)

One reason fundamentalist environmentalists are credulous about the vivid eschatology of fundamentalist Christianity is the centrality of the apocalypse to both creeds. The crucial difference is that the Christian apocalypse, in either its vivid and imminent fundamentalist form or its more traditional Catholic and Orthodox form, includes the promise of salvation and redemption for man *and nature*, while the secular eco-apocalypse is barren and hopeless. One irony of this comparison is the way in which it reveals a greater anthropocentric conceit on the part of fundamentalist environmentalism than fundamentalist Christianity. The loose talk of “destroying the planet” on the part of fundamentalist environmentalism cannot be taken literally, since even the complete destruction of humanity through a catastrophe (such as nuclear war or disease) would not eradicate the ability of the planet to regenerate life, even as the asteroid that wiped out 90 percent of all species 100 million years ago did not prevent the cycles of nature from generating successor species (including humankind). For all of the nature-worship that comes along with fundamentalist environmentalism, it is surprising that it has not developed a secular doctrine of resurrection based on evolution to go along with its doctrine of the eco-apocalypse.

Christianity and Conservation

This contrast is only one way in which the eco-evangelical dialogue can bring clarity to several problems of environmental thought that are too often avoided. The first concerns the hierarchy of nature. The Bible teaches that humankind is an intermediate being, higher

than the beasts but lower than the angels and God. This is the foundation for man’s “dominion” and stewardship over nature. The recently adopted “Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” noted:

We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part. We are not the owners of creation, but its stewards, summoned by God to “watch over and care for it” (Genesis 2:15). This implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it.¹¹

Fundamentalist environmentalism, by contrast, sees humankind as merely another expression of the natural world, not intrinsically different or superior to any other form of nature. This often comes to sight in what might be called the environmental version of natural right, though in this case it is the denial that human individuals have any rights above or distinct from any other species. In some extreme cases environmentalists regard humankind as the enemy of nature because of humans’ power to transform nature.¹²

This view may be fading from conventional environmental thought. Jared Diamond offers some encouragement, writing in *Collapse* that “while I do love New Guinea birds, I love my own sons, my wife, my friends, New Guineans, and other people. I’m more interested in environmental issues because of what I see as their consequences for people than because of their consequences for birds.”¹³ This is more consonant with the Christian understanding of the environment, which, while affirming the duty of humans to be good stewards of the earth, does not confuse or deny that nature exists to serve the needs of the beings that stand in an exalted place in the hierarchy of nature. To environmentalists uncomfortable with the “anthropocentrism” of Christian cosmology, some common ground might be found in that aspect of the doctrine of the Fall of Man that implies at least a partial estrangement from nature.

The second implication of the Christian teaching on the environment is its effect on the perennial debate between conservation and preservation. This debate is as old as modern environmentalism itself and in historical terms can be seen in the personal clash between Gifford Pinchot and John Muir. Once friends,

they became estranged over disagreement about whether resources should be conserved for future human use or preserved in perpetuity for their own sake.¹⁴ The Christian teachings on dominion and stewardship would seem to tilt the debate in favor of the conservationist view, at least in practical policy terms. Yet the spiritual contemplation of natural wonders as an expression of God's power and love suggests that preservation is not disharmonious with a Christian environmentalism. It is significant that Muir chose biblical imagery—"money changers in the temple"—to describe his revulsion of human intrusion into the natural splendor of Yosemite. There will be no getting around the difference that for a Christian, the contemplation of the natural is important because it points to the supernatural, while for the secular environmentalist nature is contemplated for its own sake. Still, a fruitful dialogue might be had on this point.

While there is much conventional environmentalists might learn from Christian theology, evangelicals should take care not to introduce new confusions into their own ranks or to succumb to transient secular enthusiasms. Liberal denominations (i.e., the core members of the National Council of Churches) have sought to halt or reverse their steep decline in membership by joining every "progressive" secular enthusiasm to come along and offering a religious gloss.¹⁵ This process reached its nadir with the "nuclear freeze" movement in the 1980s, when the American Catholic bishops, in a stunning lapse into theological confusion, issued the statement that the existence of nuclear weapons threatened God's sovereignty over creation, which comes close to denying God's omnipotence. Evangelicals generally and laudably resisted this weak-mindedness—remember that it was before the National Association of Evangelicals that Ronald Reagan gave his famous "evil empire" speech, where he challenged the obfuscation of moral equivalency and appeasement behind the nuclear freeze proposal.

Many liberal churches, struggling to remain "relevant," made the easy transition from nuclear pacifism to the environment when the Cold War ended. And so it is a potentially worrisome to see the NAE take steps in the direction of environmental correctness in its recent statement, such as is found in the following passage:

We urge Christians to shape their personal lives in creation-friendly ways: practicing effective recycling, conserving resources, and experiencing the

joy of contact with nature. We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats.¹⁶

There is nothing per se wrong with this list; many items constitute obvious common sense. However, the circumstantial contingency of some items such as conservation and fuel efficiency makes it a stretch to claim a general theological mandate in their favor. Recycling in some circumstances can be wasteful of resources, and government-mandated fuel efficiency has been shown to have the unwelcome tradeoff of higher automobile fatalities. It is hard to see a clear theological or biblical sanction for one side of that tradeoff.

This kind of tradeoff is especially acute in the area of climate change. The NAE's statement on stewardship includes the call "to relieve human suffering caused by bad environmental practice," but evangelical concern for climate change would do no favors for the suffering millions in developing nations if it blindly endorsed near-term carbon suppression as its policy preference for dealing with climate change, since it would retard economic growth—and also perpetuate current bad environmental practices—in those nations. Ironically the NAE statement contains the general reasons for this: "Because natural systems are extremely complex, human actions can have unexpected side effects. We must therefore approach our stewardship of creation with humility and caution."¹⁷

It would be useful for the NAE to consider the Cornwall Declaration, a statement of environmental principles developed by Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish theologians for the Acton Institute in 1999. (Over 1,000 leading clergy, theologians, and scholars have endorsed the declaration.) The portion relevant to climate change policy reads as follows:

Public policies to combat exaggerated risks can dangerously delay or reverse the economic development necessary to improve not only human life but also human stewardship of the environment. The poor, who are most often citizens of developing nations, are often forced to suffer longer in poverty with its attendant high rates of malnutrition, disease, and mortality; as a consequence, they are often the most injured by such misguided, though well-intended, policies.¹⁸

Indeed, embracing the conventional wisdom on climate change would be to capitulate to the transient worldliness that evangelicals have always been so good at avoiding. They risk changing the climate change speck in their eye into a log.

Notes

1. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming in a Post-Environmental World* (New York: Breakthrough Institute, 2004), available at: www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf.
2. Deborah Solomon, "Earthly Evangelist," *The New York Times Magazine* (April 3, 2005): 17.
3. Blaine Harden, "The Greening of Evangelicals; Christian Right Turns, Sometimes Warily, to Environmentalism," *Washington Post*, February 6, 2005.
4. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (March 10, 1967).
5. Glenn Scherer, "The Godly Must Be Crazy," *Grist* (October 27, 2004), available at <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2004/10/27/scherer-christian/index.html>.
6. Bill Moyers, "There Is No Tomorrow," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, February 10, 2005, available at <http://www.startribune.com/stories/1519/5211218.html>. See also Bill Moyers, "Welcome to Domsday," *New York Review of Books* 52, no. 5 (March 24, 2005): 8–10. For additional background, see http://powerlineblog.com/archives/2005_02.php#009475.
7. See James Watt, "The Religious Left's Lies," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2005.
8. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2004), 462.
9. Tim Flannery, "Learning from the Past to Change Our Future," *Science* 307 (January 7, 2005): 45.
10. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 86.
11. National Association of Evangelicals, "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," (October 8, 2004), 11, available through www.nae.net. For a one-stop site for different denominational statements and resolutions on the environment, see www.acton.org/ppolicy/environment/theology/index.html.
12. This view has a surprisingly long pedigree. John Muir wrote: "I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I should be tempted to sympathize with the bears." Muir is cited in Bob Pepperman Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 86–87.
13. Diamond, *Collapse*, 16.
14. Bob Pepperman Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed*, 81–105.
15. See, among other authors, Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Norman writes: "Christianity today is . . . being reinterpreted as a scheme of social and political action, dependent, it is true, upon supernatural authority for its ultimate claims to attention, but rendered in categories that are derived from the political theories and practices of contemporary society" (2).
16. National Association of Evangelicals, "For the Health of the Nation," 12.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, "Cornwall Declaration," available at www.acton.org/ppolicy/environment/cornwall.html. As the blogosphere often says, read the whole thing.