

Evangelicalism, Environmental Activism, and Climate Change in the United States

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Abstract

In most developed countries, a wide consensus exists among opinion leaders, mass publics and the media regarding the basic science behind human-induced climate change and the need to act, at least in the abstract. However, in the United States, the debate over the legitimacy of the global warming hypothesis and related responses rages on. One major source of division that has fueled this dissonance has been the inability of secular left leaning environmental social movement organization (SMO) opinion leaders and politically, religiously, and socially conservative evangelical elites to find common ground on this issue.

This broader conflict is often overshadowed by the fact that there is also a related discussion going on within the evangelical community itself about how to respond to environmental threats. A growing group of evangelical environmentalists, commonly referred to as “creation care” activists, support stronger initiatives to deal with pressing environmental issues. Accepting the basic science on global warming and other environmental threats, they have come to the realization that environmental destruction is just as much a moral imperative as other core evangelical issues including the right to life, serving the poor, conversion and salvation, gay marriage, etc. However, this growth in environmental awareness is not without its skeptics.

The purpose of this case study is to examine the continuing debate going on within the evangelical tradition over how to respond to environmental challenges. It concludes that prospects for the spread of creation care thinking, especially among rank and file evangelicals, are good. However, opposition among skeptics remains strong, and continues to slow environmental activists’ efforts to push their theological and political agendas, both within their own denominations and in the broader political arena.

Introduction

[1] On Saturday March 30, 2008, millions of citizens around the world gathered together to observe Earth Hour. The event, which began as a World Wildlife Fund-Australia sponsored project in 2007, has quickly morphed into a global phenomenon. One of the more interesting characteristics of this particular event is that it advocates no political party or ideology. Rather, it focuses attention on the need for individuals, organizations, and governments of all persuasions and nationalities to confront global warming. As such, it has become a distinctly ecumenical activity. In Atlanta, one of the cities that formally committed to observing Earth Hour, dozens of churches, synagogues, and mosques became gathering places for people of all religious and political persuasions. Together, they lit candles and meditated and ruminated about the global environment and the need for each individual to take personal responsibility for their own contribution to climate change (Quinn).

[2] The Atlanta observances are symbolic of a significant shift that is going on in the U.S. environmental movement. In most developed countries, a wide consensus exists among opinion leaders, mass publics, and the media regarding the basic science behind climate change and the need to act, at least in the abstract. However, in the United States, the debate over the legitimacy of the global warming hypothesis and related responses rages on. One major source of division that has fueled this dissonance has been the inability of secular left leaning environmental social movement organization (SMO) opinion leaders and politically and socially conservative Christian groups (including evangelicals) to find common ground on this issue. For decades, these groups have engaged in existential battles over a host of topics including abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, science education, and environmentalism, broadly defined (Harrington). However, this situation seems to be changing.

[3] A growing group of evangelical environmentalists (hereafter referred to as creation care activists) are beginning to put aside past differences and accept the need to take action on pressing environmental issues. Accepting the basic science on global warming and other environmental threats, they have come to the realization that environmental destruction is just as much a moral imperative as other core evangelical issues. Also, recent polling data reveals that most rank and file evangelicals also support reaching over the theological and political aisle on a variety of social and moral topics, including global warming (Pew Trust 2008c). However, this growth in environmental awareness is not without its skeptics. The strength of this opposition is revealed in the fact that few major evangelical denominations (in contrast to mainstream protestant denominations) have adopted formal pronouncements acknowledging the threat of global warming or the need to act.

“Creation Care” Advocacy and its Skeptics

[4] Evangelical environmental activists have branded their own phrase for their particular flavor of environmentalism, called “creation care.” This concept evokes five central strands of evangelical thinking as it relates the environment. First, it affirms evangelicals’ commitment to the idea that creation of the physical earth is the consequence of an act of willful agency on the part of a living God, as described in the Bible. Second, it stresses that the creation story expressed in the book of Genesis calls on all Christians to act as

responsible stewards over the Earth. Third, creation care activists believe that the Bible in its entirety is infused with calls for believers to live in harmony with nature and provides a coherent environmental ethic. Fourth, creation care adherents believe in the infallibility of the Bible, emphasize literal or near literal interpretation of the text, and stress that the book stands above all others as a guide to Christian moral action. However, they also value other sources of information, including scientific research, as a guide to their understanding of how stewardship can be practiced in the real world. Fifth, creation care activists are increasingly engaged in environmental cooperation with non-evangelical Christian groups; e.g., Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Catholics. Some leaders also call for closer cooperation with secular environmental groups (Lerner; Crouch; Wallis; see Appendix for detailed citations). These include evangelicals who lead prominent secular environmental groups (e.g., John Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation) or scientific organizations (e.g., Sir John Houghton, former chair of scientific assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

[5] Interestingly, evangelicals opposed to creation care activists (hereafter called “creation care skeptics”) generally agree with some of the five points listed above, at least in the abstract. However, their interpretation of what the Bible has to say about the environment and human/God/nature relationships, Christian stewardship, and their acceptance of the scientific record is quite different. They also differ on the issue of environmental ecumenicalism. Many are suspicious of cooperating with theologically and/or politically liberal denominations and secular groups who either misinterpret or ignore Biblical precepts about human-God-nature relations, “mix and match” Christianity with New Age thought or Eastern religions, and lean towards pantheism or nature worship (Cornwall Alliance 2006; also see the Appendix).

[6] It is to this debate that we now turn by addressing the following questions. First, what are the main factors that have precipitated the growth of creation care activism among members of the evangelical tradition? Second, what are the central tenets of creation care thinking? Third, how has the growing consensus among scientists about human induced climate change influenced the growth of this phenomenon? Fourth, which evangelical groups oppose creation care activism and why? Fifth, what are the prospects for the spread of creation care thinking among rank and file believers? Sixth, what are some possible political implications for the rise of environmental activism among evangelicals, including the United States’ reengagement with the rest of the developed world on the issue of global warming?

The Relevance of Religion to the Global Warming Debate

[7] Many secular academics question the relevance of religiosity to the study of environmental politics and policy in modern society (Gottlieb; Fowler; Gardiner). However, there are a number of reasons why evangelicals deserve our research attention as we continue to search for solutions to mobilizing public support for laws and regulations that reduce human impacts on the global climate. First, organized religion and religiosity continues to be relevant in American society. A recent national survey of adults commissioned by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008c) reveals that most Americans attend religious services at least once a week (54%), pray weekly (75%), believe in a God or universal spirit (88%), and consider religion to be at least somewhat important to

their lives (82%). Seventy-eight percent of Americans identify themselves as “Christian,” while only 16% consider themselves to be unaffiliated with any religious tradition (also see Table 2).

[8] Second, evangelicals are numerous. At 26% of all adults surveyed, self-identified evangelicals constitute the largest single Christian religious tradition, followed by Catholics (23.9%) and mainline Protestants (18.1%). Table 1 provides a summary snapshot of religious self-identification in American society.

[9] Third, many evangelical groups are politically active and influential. Evangelicals have been regularly pigeonholed by pundits as unquestioning supporters of successive Republican administrations, including their position on global warming. Of particular relevance here is ongoing skepticism about climate change science, stance against any federal regulation of carbon dioxide emissions, and unwillingness to positively engage in international treaties and negotiations relating to climate change (Andrew; Wallis; Dionne). But there are some important exceptions. One case in point involves conservative evangelical opposition to Republican efforts to weaken the *Endangered Species Act* in 1996 (Steinfels). Another involves creation care activists’ active lobbying efforts in support of the *McCain-Lieberman Climate Protection Act*.

Table 1. Major Religious Traditions in the United States (Pew Trust 2008c)

| | % Adults |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Christian | 78.4 |
| Protestant | 51.3 |
| Evangelical ¹ | 26.3 |
| Mainline ² | 18.1 |
| Historically Black ³ | 6.9 |
| Catholic | 23.9 |
| Mormon | 1.7 |
| Jehovah’s Witness | 0.7 |
| Orthodox | 0.6 |
| Other Christian | 0.3 |
| Other Religions | 4.7 |
| Jewish | 1.7 |
| Buddhist | 0.7 |
| Muslim | 0.6 |
| Hindu | 0.4 |
| Other World Religions | < 0.3 |

¹ Evangelical includes: Southern Baptist Convention, Nondenominational evangelical, Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventist, etc.

² Mainline includes: American Baptist Churches, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, etc.

³ Historically Black includes: National Baptist Convention, Missionary Baptist, African American Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, etc.

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Other faiths | 1.2 |
| Unaffiliated | 16.1 |
| Don't Know/Refused | 0.8 |
| Total | 100 |

[10] Fourth, creation care advocates offer their own distinctive approach to the growing realization among both faith based and secular groups that in order to make real progress on climate change, individuals, families, and organizations need to change their lifestyles and operating procedures to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Creation care advocates believe that the Bible provides a coherent environmental ethic that can guide people to live more environmentally friendly lifestyles (Barnett; Earth Ministry). So, it may be useful to explore the potential receptiveness of evangelicals to the creation care message, of which many are still unaware.

What is an Evangelical?

[11] The term “evangelical” means different things to different people. The literature provides no definitive guidance on how to define this concept. Some writers emphasize theological definitions while others offer descriptive or overtly political interpretations. Among some politically liberal secular groups, evangelicalism is used as a synonym for religious and political fundamentalism (Gottlieb; Crouch). Political pundits often view evangelicals as a single homogenous voting block, consistent and loyal supporters of the Republican Party. In fact, 79% of evangelicals who voted in the 2004 national election, voted for George Bush. However, the voting record alone does not provide a full picture of evangelical political, social, and economic beliefs, especially for those who did not vote. Also, since 2004, evangelical support for the Bush administration eroded significantly (Lerner; Lerner and Wallis).

[12] In order to develop a better understanding of the evolution of creation care activism and its potential influence on evangelicalism in general, this study adopts a more descriptive approach. The Pew Research Center provides a revealing picture of the current state of the evangelical tradition in American society. The authors define “religious tradition” as “a set of denominations and congregations with similar beliefs, practices and origins” (2008c: 13). Each tradition includes many organizationally distinct “denominations” and “families” (denominations with common historical origins). According to the report, the evangelical tradition includes 54 denominations grouped into different 16 family traditions.

[13] So, how do self-identified evangelicals characterize their religious beliefs? Table 2 compares national, evangelical and mainline protestant attitudes about God, the Bible, and religious practice. As stated before, the great majority of Americans identify with some form of faith tradition, believe in a God or universal spirit, and engage in religious activities. However, evangelicals are even more active in formal religious activities than the norm. Ninety six percent of evangelicals view religion to be important in their lives vs. 82% of the general public and 87% of mainline Protestants. They are much more likely to attend church (72% attend at least once a month) or pray weekly (92%) than other groups.

Table 2. Religious Values in American Society by % of Adult Population (Pew Trust 2008c)

| | National | Evangelical | Mainline |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|
| Literal interpretation of Scripture | | | |
| Word of God literally true word for word | 33 | 59 | 22 |
| Word of God, but not literally true | 30 | 29 | 38 |
| Other | 37 | 12 | 40 |
| Interpretation of religious teachings | | | |
| Only one true way to interpret teaching of my religion | 27 | 41 | 14 |
| There is more than one true way to interpret . . . | 68 | 53 | 82 |
| Other | 5 | 6 | 4 |
| Belief in God or universal spirit | | | |
| Belief in God/certain | 71 | 90 | 73 |
| Belief in God/fairly certain | 17 | 8 | 21 |
| Other | 12 | 2 | 6 |
| My religion is the one true faith | | | |
| My religion is one true faith leading to eternal life | 24 | 36 | 12 |
| Many religions can lead to eternal life | 70 | 57 | 83 |
| Other | 7 | 7 | 6 |
| Importance of religion in life | | | |
| Very important | 56 | 79 | 52 |
| Somewhat important | 26 | 17 | 35 |
| Other | 18 | 4 | 13 |
| Frequency of church attendance | | | |
| More than once a week | 15 | 30 | 8 |
| Once a week | 24 | 28 | 26 |
| Once or twice a month | 15 | 14 | 19 |
| Other | 46 | 28 | 47 |
| Frequency of prayer | | | |
| Daily | 58 | 78 | 53 |
| Weekly | 17 | 14 | 23 |
| Other | 25 | 8 | 24 |

[14] Another interesting finding is that evangelicals are more tolerant of other faith traditions than many liberal commentators assume. A plurality of evangelicals share the view held by the general public and mainline Protestants that many religions can lead to eternal life (57%, 70%, 83%, respectively) and that there is more than one way to interpret religious teachings (53%, 68%, 82%). However, when it comes to the interpretation of the Scriptures, evangelicals are far more likely than the general public or mainline groups to believe that the Bible is literally true (59%, 33%, 22%). This is consistent with theologically based definitions of evangelicalism that emphasize the overriding importance of the Bible as a guide to religious belief. This scriptural emphasis is clear in the writings of both creation care activists

and skeptics who frequently invoke biblical passages to support their arguments. This particular type of writing style is one reason why academics either ignore or are unfamiliar with the creation care phenomenon.

[15] Table 3 shows that evangelicals are not only more tolerant of other religions than popularly believed, but are also politically diverse. While a plurality indentify themselves as Republican leaning, 34% lean Democratic. Also, their attitudes about two other hot button issues – the size of government and support for government programs for the poor – are not dramatically different from Americans in general or mainline Protestants.

[16] Evangelicals are often portrayed in the press as being hostile towards environmental laws and regulations. This may be true of some evangelical leaders. But the polling data reveals that rank and file evangelicals are just as supportive of these initiatives as the general population (Harrington). Evangelical concern about global warming does not differ significantly from the overall population. Multiple polls conducted between 2000 and 2006 reveal that around 75% of American adults believe that global warming is either a very serious or somewhat serious problem (Globescan 2000, 2006 from Leiserowitz 2006). In another scientific poll conducted by Ellison Research and sponsored by the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), 84% of evangelicals surveyed express their support for some kind of global warming legislation and 70% believe that global warming is a problem that threatens future generations. When asked if they would favor legislation even if it costs \$15 a month per household, 70% still expressed support (2007).

Table 3. Religion and Political Attitudes: Partisanship, Size of Government, and Environment by % of Adult Population (Pew Trust 2008c)

| | National | Evangelical | Mainline |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|
| Party identification | | | |
| Republican | 26 | 38 | 31 |
| Lean Republican | 10 | 12 | 10 |
| Independent | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| Lean Democratic | 15 | 10 | 14 |
| Democratic | 32 | 24 | 29 |
| Other | 8 | 7 | 6 |
| Size of government | | | |
| Smaller government, fewer services | 43 | 48 | 51 |
| Bigger government, more services | 46 | 41 | 37 |
| Other | 9 | 9 | 12 |
| Views about environmental protection | | | |
| Stricter environmental laws cost jobs and hurt economy | 30 | 35 | 28 |
| Stricter environmental laws worth the cost | 61 | 54 | 64 |
| Other | 9 | 11 | 8 |

Aid to poor

| | | | |
|---|----|----|----|
| Government should do more to help needy, even if it means more debt | 62 | 57 | 58 |
| Government today can't afford to do much more to help needy | 29 | 34 | 33 |
| Other | 9 | 9 | 9 |

[17] It is important to note that while evangelicals do not differ greatly from the general population on key issues, there are a few hot button topics where they do stand out. Table 4 reveals that evangelicals are far more likely to support strict legal limitations or an outright ban on abortion than the national norm or mainline adherents (61%, 43%, 32%) and believe that homosexuality should be discouraged by society (64%, 40%, 34%). These two “wedge” issues, long embraced by the Republican Party, have played a central role in limiting the willingness of evangelical groups to work with more theologically and politically liberal groups on a host of issues including environmental protection.

[18] Finally, the issue of evolution has proven to be particularly challenging for evangelicals. Many question whether they can accept scientific arguments about long-term climate change from scientists who almost universally embrace evolution. Most Catholics and mainstream Protestant elites addressed this issue long ago, believing that evolution is God’s “method” for creating the world and humans and that the Genesis story that describes God as creating the heaven and earth in 6 days need not be taken literally. Most creation care activists also harbor doubts about evolution. However, they have chosen to accept most of the science anyway. But lingering doubts about the legitimacy of scientific research continue to act as a theological barrier to some evangelicals’ ability to accept climate change science. Also, the survey shows that doubts about evolution are not limited to evangelicals. Almost half of the general population also questions evolutionary science.

Table 4. Religion and Political Attitudes: Selected Cultural Issues by % of Adult Population (Pew Trust 2008c)

| | National | Evangelical | Mainline |
|---|----------|-------------|----------|
| Government's role in protecting morality | | | |
| Government do more to protect morality | 40 | 50 | 33 |
| Government should not be too involved | 52 | 41 | 58 |
| Other | 8 | 9 | 9 |
| Should churches express views on politics? | | | |
| Yes | 50 | 58 | 46 |
| No | 46 | 38 | 50 |
| Other | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| Views about abortion | | | |
| Legal in all cases | 18 | 9 | 20 |
| Legal in most cases | 33 | 24 | 42 |
| Illegal in most cases | 27 | 36 | 25 |
| Illegal in all cases | 16 | 25 | 7 |
| Other | 6 | 6 | 7 |

Views about homosexuality

| | | | |
|--|----|----|----|
| Homosexuality should be accepted by society | 50 | 26 | 56 |
| Homosexuality should be discouraged by society | 40 | 64 | 34 |
| Other | 10 | 10 | 10 |

Views about evolution

| | | | |
|----------|----|----|----|
| Agree | 48 | 23 | 51 |
| Disagree | 45 | 70 | 42 |
| Other | 7 | 6 | 8 |

Development of Creation Care Activism

[19] This broad socio-demographic picture of evangelicalism in America provides a useful background for studying the debate between creation care activists and skeptics over environmental issues. With a few exceptions, it is only in the past few years that the press has “discovered” creation care activism. This coverage has largely centered around the issuance of a few new newsworthy documents, including the National Association of Evangelicals’ “Sandy Cove Covenant and Invitation” (2004a), “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action” (2006a), the “Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change” (Southern Baptist Convention 2007b), and the back and forth public debate between creation care activists and skeptics and their political allies. However, the history of evangelical interest in environmental issues goes back much farther.

[20] One of the first evangelical contributions to the debate over the role of religion in environmental thought was Francis Schaeffer’s *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*. Responding to late 1960s criticisms asserting the negative role of that Christianity played in the historical development of human/nature relations leveled by Lynn White and others, Schaeffer argues that the Bible explicitly calls on Christians to care for creation. Echoing later evangelical commentators, he notes, “Christians should understand the creation principle, have a reason for respecting nature, and when they do, it results in benefits to man. Let us be clear: it is not just a pragmatic attitude, there is basis for it. We treat it with respect because God made it” (76).

[21] In 1978, a group of environmentally minded evangelicals founded an umbrella organization, Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA). This was followed by the creation of the Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies in 1980. The institute became a center for evangelical research on environmental issues. Its founder, Calvin DeWitt, has written numerous influential texts on creation care including *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* (1991) and *Earthwise: A Biblical Response Environmental Issues* (1994). Some other notable books written during the 1980s and early 1990s include Loren Wilkenson’s *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* and Peter De Vos’s *Earthkeeping in the 1990s: Stewardship of Creation*.

[22] In the late 1980s, the developing scientific consensus about human-induced deterioration of ecosystems, the ozone layer, and global warming stimulated a flurry of environmental activity among mainline Protestant denominations. By the end of the 1990s, virtually every mainline denomination – Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church

of Christ – as well as the Catholic Church adopted some form of doctrinal statement about global warming and the need for church elders and parishioners to act (Earth Ministry). However, evangelical denominations were officially silent.

[23] But evangelicals affiliated with the Au Sable Institute and Evangelicals for Social Action pushed for a stronger stance on the issue. They were motivated not only by increasingly dire environmental imperatives, but also wanted to counter what many believed to be pantheistic and secularist tendencies in mainstream eco-theology and in society in general. Of key concern here is the role of the Bible in religious discourse. Max Oelschlaeger, echoing Schaeffer's early writings, notes that theological *conservatives* (of which evangelicals are one group) "advance biblically based creation stories exclusively: the Bible is effectively a revealed document of history." On the other hand, most mainline churches take a moderate or liberal stance towards the Bible. "*Moderates* believe that the Bible is authoritative and divinely inspired but not inerrant. They also recognize the existence of some truth in other sacred texts" (21). Oelschlaeger states that for *liberals*, "the Bible is viewed as neither absolutely infallible nor as invariably literal but as a text that demands interpretation . . . and (liberals) are inclined towards pantheism" (22). Finally, *radicals* exist on the fringes of Christianity, adopting some Christian discourse while questioning core beliefs such as the idea that God made man in his image and humans are a superior chosen species separate and apart from others. They also fully embrace scientific explanations of natural phenomena. *Liberals* and *radicals* are also more likely to "mix and match" Christianity with New Age and other religious belief systems, including Hinduism, Buddhism, neo-pagan, and Native American approaches.

[24] Ron Sider, co-founder of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), echoes this last point in a 1994 radio interview saying:

One of the important things is that there are environmentalists out there who are saying some very crazy things, in terms of religion and theology. They're New Age, they worship the earth, mother goddess and so on. And at the same time it's important to realize that they're groping for spiritual meaning, they're groping for a religious foundation, but they don't think Christianity is the way to get it. And what we're saying is, Biblical truth is exactly the foundation we need for working seriously at our environmental problems (quoted in Beisner: 9).

An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation

[25] So, in the early 1990s, Au Sable and ESA supporters decided to strengthen further and coordinate their response to these environmental, theological, and political challenges by issuing "On the Care of Creation: An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation." The document begins,

As followers of Jesus Christ, committed to the full authority of the Scriptures, and aware of the ways we have degraded Creation, we believe that biblical faith is essential to the solution of ecological problems . . . these degradations of creation can be summed up as; 1. land degradation; 2. deforestation; 3. species extinction; 4. water degradation; 5. global

toxification; 6. the alteration of the atmosphere; and 7. human and cultural degradation” (EEN 1994a: 1).

It also notes that the primary cause for these harms is that “our God-given stewardly talents have often been warped from their intended purpose . . . we have ignored our creaturely limits and have used the earth with greed rather than care” (EEN 1994a: 1).

[26] Creation care activists provide their own distinctive interpretation of the biblical creation story. When discussing the role of humans as stewards over creation, they emphasize Genesis 2:15, which states, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The activists interpret this verse as an exhortation for humans to serve and preserve the natural world. Humans do have a special place in creation, but are also responsible for caring for and preserving God’s “good” earth (EEN 1994b).

[27] The Evangelical Declaration provides a long list of harms that activists believe contradict biblical teachings, including population growth, overuse of resources, poverty and economic inequality, species extinction, and overconsumption. For instance, in defense of species protection, the Declaration notes:

the Creator’s concern is for all creatures. God Declares all creation “good” (*NIV*, Genesis 1:31); promises care in a covenant with all creatures (*NIV*, Genesis 9:1-17); delights in creatures which have no human apparent usefulness (*NIV*, Job 39-41); and wills, in Christ, to reconcile all things to himself (*NIV* Colossians 1:20).

Regarding poverty and economic injustice, the authors note,

we call on all Christians to work for godly, just and sustainable economies which reflect God’s sovereign economy and enable men, women and children to flourish along with the diversity of creation. We recognize that poverty forces people to degrade creation in order to survive; therefore we support the development of just, free economies which empower the poor to create abundance without diminishing creation’s bounty (EEN 2004a: 3).

Skeptic Responses

[28] While the harms identified in the Declaration may sound unremarkable to secular environmentalists, it signaled a significant departure for evangelical elites. It offered a theologically innovative interpretation of the Scriptures that varied from mainstream evangelicalism. And, not surprisingly, it stimulated a significant response from climate care skeptics. One of the most prominent evangelical critics is Calvin Beisner. In his critique of the Declaration, he begins by recognizing the good intentions of creation care supporters, but then proceeds to roundly criticize their philosophy on theological, economic, and scientific grounds. He notes that creation care activists misinterpret key Bible passages, and especially those that refer to God/human/nature relationships. He argues that Genesis 1:28-30 offers a different interpretation of God’s stewardship message than the softer toned Genesis 2:15.

[29] He interprets these passages as proof that God does intend for humans to practice dominion over nature, noting that “the dominion mandate, properly understood, gives man legitimate authority to subdue and rule the earth, progressively conforming it to his needs and the glory of God” (17). He implies that creation care activist interpretations of the Scriptures risk succumbing to the very threat that EEN leader Ron Sider said they most feared, pantheism or nature worship. He continues by providing a verse-by-verse critique of creation care interpretations of numerous passages that activists believe support their view that the Bible offers a comprehensive and holistic environmental ethic. Beisner counters activist arguments by forwarding biblically supported counterpoints supporting free markets, democracy, consumerism, and industrialization. His analysis also draws from conservative economists who at the time largely rejected the need for environmental regulation (Simon and Kahn; Singer). He also dismisses most scientific research on human induced environmental harms, including global warming, species extinction, and ozone layer depletion.

[30] These and other criticisms are reinforced in summary form in another document issued by a skeptic umbrella organization called the Cornwall Alliance in 2000. “The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship” begins by stating that most of the environmental concerns of creation care activists and environmentalists are either greatly exaggerated or simply incorrect. In fact, human ingenuity and management of the earth’s resources has brought unprecedented wealth and prosperity to the world, and environmentalists are incorrect in their assessment of the present state of the biosphere. The Declaration begins,

many are concerned that liberty, science and technology are more of a threat to the environment than a blessing to humanity and nature . . . many people mistakenly view humans principally as consumers and polluters rather than producers and stewards. Consequently, they ignore our potential, as bearers of God’s image, to add to the earth’s abundance . . . many people believe that nature knows best, or that the earth – untouched by human hands – is the ideal. Such romanticism leads some to deify nature or oppose human domination over creation. Humanity alone of all the created order is capable of developing other resources and can thus enrich creation, so it can properly be said that the human person is the most valuable resource on earth (2000a).

[31] The Declaration notes that developing costly command and control policies to respond to “speculative” problems like global warming, overpopulation, and species loss will also expand rather than reduce poverty to the developing world. Economic development, liberty, and free markets provide the best path out of poverty for the world’s poor. They assert that economic growth reverses rather than increases environmental damage. They also oppose population control policies, noting that “human beings are called to be fruitful” and that God has provided humans with the skills and ingenuity to effectively increase the bounty of the earth’s resources. Other Cornwall Alliance documents, including the “Cornwall Stewardship Agenda” (2000b) and “A Call to Truth, Prudence and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming” (2006), frequently cite works published by the dwindling cadre of scientists and pseudo-scientists who doubt human-induced climate change hypothesis (see also Singer and Avery; Spencer; Bailey).

What Would Jesus Drive?

[32] One of the more notable responses to the Cornwall Alliance declaration came in May 2003. Jim Ball, President of the Evangelical Environmental Network, led a new initiative, the What Would Jesus Drive campaign, which explicitly exhorts Christians to take personal moral responsibility for negative externalities that contribute to global warming by making more environmentally friendly transportation choices. The accompanying “Call to Action” document, which was signed by more than 90 evangelical leaders, states:

pollution from vehicles has a major impact on human health and the rest of God’s creation. It contributes significantly to the threat of global warming. Our reliance on imported oil from unstable regions threatens peace and security. . . Making transportation choices that threaten millions of human beings violates Jesus’ basic commandments: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (*NIV* Mark 12:30-31); and “do unto others as you would have them do to you” (*NIV* Luke 6:31) (EEN 2003: 1).

[33] In 2004, evangelicals reinforced this message during a gathering in Sandy Cove, MD, where leaders agreed to a “covenant” on creation care. The event was sponsored by the 35,000 church strong National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The NAE action was spearheaded by a new emerging champion of the movement, Richard Cizik, vice president of governmental affairs for NAE. Cizik’s experience mirrors that of many recent converts to creation care thinking. Mr. Cizik recalled that WWJD founder Jim Ball “dragged” him to a climate change conference in 2002. Speakers at the meeting included noted scientist and fellow evangelical John Houghton, former Chair of the scientific assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) from 1988-2002. Dr. Houghton spoke about the 2001 IPCC *Third Assessment Report*, which up to that time represented the most authoritative and comprehensive scientific study ever undertaken on climate change (Watson et. al.). Cizik says, “he had a conversion on climate change so profound in Oxford that he likened it to an alter call” (Goodstein 2005: A 16). Another prominent evangelical and scientist who has convinced many evangelicals to pay more attention to global warming and other environmental issues is Larry Schweiger, president of the secular National Wildlife Federation. Then NAE president Rev. Ted Haggard was also initially supportive of the movement.

[34] The covenant asks fellow evangelicals to “engage with us the most pressing environmental questions of our day, such as health threats to families and the unborn, the negative effects of environmental degradation on the poor and endangered creatures and the important current debate about human-induced climate change” (NAE 2004a). It also presses for the upgrading of environmental protection and care to a “permanent dimension of our discipleship” (NAE 2004a). This was followed by another NAE statement, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” in October of the same year that included a section on climate change (NAE 2004b).

Creation Care and the Climate Protection Act

[35] This wave of activity among creation care advocates coincided with Senate hearings and debate on climate change policy. The legislation under consideration was the bipartisan

McCain-Lieberman Climate Protection Act that, among other things, would have committed the federal government to regulate CO₂ emissions, including a freeze on emissions at 2005 levels. This placed the activists squarely in opposition to Bush Administration policy, and raised the ire of many other Republican leaning evangelical leaders who had largely ignored or were unaware of the creation care phenomenon growing within their own ranks. Deflecting this criticism, Cizik, Ball, and others insisted that their advocacy of the new legislation was morally, not politically motivated. Both sponsors of the bill acknowledged the important role that evangelicals could play in this debate because unlike the leaders of most secular environmental groups, evangelicals were welcome on Capitol Hill. In the end, the legislation did not pass through the then Republican controlled Senate, but it set an important precedence for future legislative action.

An Evangelical Call to Action

[36] In 2006, the Sandy Cove signatories issued “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” This document remains the most explicit statement to date on the motivations and objectives of creation care activists. It begins by noting,

we are proud of the evangelical community’s long-standing commitment to the sanctity of human life. But we also offer moral witness in many venues and on many issues. Sometimes the issues that we have taken on, such as sex trafficking, genocide in the Sudan, and the AIDS epidemic in Africa, have surprised some outside observers. While individuals and organizations can be called to concentrate on certain issues, we are not a single issue movement (ECI 2006a: 1).

It continues,

Over the last several years many of us have engaged in study, reflection and prayer related to the issue of climate change (often called global warming). For most of us, until recently this has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed, many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to Christians. But now we have seen and heard enough to offer the following moral argument related to the matter of human induced climate change (ECI 2006a: 1).

[37] The declaration includes four claims. 1. Human induced climate change is real; 2. The consequences of climate change will be significant, and will hit the poor the hardest; 3. Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem; and 4. There is an urgent need to act now. Governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change – starting now (ECI 2006a). Significantly, ECI issued a companion document entitled, “Principles for Federal Policy on Climate Change” (2006b). While calling for quick legislative action, the organization also tips a hat to economic conservatives by insisting that any new policies should embrace free market principles, protect property rights, be cost effective, and place decision making authority at the lowest possible level of government. It also touted other conservative themes including

how new legislation could enhance national and energy security, international religious freedom and support rural economic development.

The “Dobson Group” Pushes Back

[38] The ECI Call To Action was originally signed by 86 evangelical Christian leaders, including the presidents of 39 evangelical colleges, the head of the Salvation Army, the editors of two prominent Christian magazines, *Christianity Today* and *Sojourner Magazine*, and author and mega church pastor Rick Warren, and generated a significant amount of media attention. But it did not go unchallenged (NAE 2006b). In January 2006, a statement issued by the so called “Dobson Group,” named after Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, asserted that “global warming is not a consensus issue” and asked the NAE to not issue any official statement on the problem. Besides Rev. Dobson, other prominent signatories included Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, Rev. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Donald Wildman, chairman of the American Family Association, and Rev. Louis Sheldon, chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition. In response to their objections, NAE leaders Ted Haggard and Richard Cizik did not initially sign the ECI, but did express public support for it (Goodstein 2006). Lamenting about the level of opposition to the creation care initiative, Calvin DeWitt added, “a year ago, it looked as though evangelicals would become a strong, collective voice for what we call creation care and others may call environmentalism. This will have negative consequences for the ability of evangelicals to influence the White House, unfortunately and sadly” (Cooperman).

[39] The Dobson Group followed up with another letter in March 2007 that called on Dr. Roy Taylor, chairman of the board of NAE to call for the resignation of Richard Cizik (who later did sign the ECI) if he did not stop advocating evangelical involvement in addressing climate change. Added to the list of signatories were Moral Majority pioneers Jerry Falwell and Gary Bauer. The letter notes that global warming “is a subject of heated controversy throughout the world . . . and we believe that it is unwise for an NAE officer to assert conclusively that those whose questions have been answered, or that the membership as a whole has taken a position on the matter” (Restoring Eden). They also criticized Cizik for becoming a darling of the “liberal media” that further compromised his capacity to serve in his official capacity.

[40] Focus on the Family’s official position statement on global warming reinforces this message, stating that there are many unanswered questions about global warming, including its causes and the potential impact of proposed policies to address it. The statement adds,

despite the uncertainty, some evangelical leaders have insisted global warming should be prioritized as the most important social issue that confronts us today. Focus on the Family firmly disagrees. For some evangelicals to position the theory of human-induced global warming above the reality of the ongoing attacks against the family and a Christian worldview is perplexing and troubling. . . Focus on the Family believes we should devote our primary energy to the clear tasks at hand – the protection of marriage and nurture of families, defense of the pre-born child, support for religious liberty and preservation of morality and decency in the culture (1).

The Southern Baptist Debate

[41] Creation care skeptics also proved their organizational mettle by pushing through a formal global warming resolution at the 2007 Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting that affirmed that the science supporting the global warming hypothesis was speculative at best. They urged,

Southern Baptists to proceed cautiously in the human-induced global warming debate in light of conflicting scientific research . . . and that we consider proposals to regulate CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions based on a maximum acceptable global temperature to be very dangerous, since attempts to meet the goal could lead to a succession of mandates of deeper cuts in emissions, which may have no appreciable effect . . . and could lead to major economic hardships on a worldwide scale (2007a).

[42] While the SBC resolution made opposition to global warming legislation formal church policy, SBC creation care activists engineered a response entitled, “A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change.” The Declaration basically reaffirms the main thrust of the ECI statement. Its four main points include: 1. Humans must care for creation and take care of our contributions to environmental degradation of all kinds; 2. It is prudent to address global climate change. While there still might be some outstanding questions, sufficient evidence now exists that it is prudent to take steps to combat it; 3. Christian moral convictions and our Southern activist doctrines demand our environmental stewardship; 4. It is time for individuals, churches, communities, and governments to act (SBC 2007b).

[43] But not to be outdone, critiques of this resolution insisted that SBC President Frank Page, who was one of the signatories, make it very clear that the declaration did not represent official SBC policy, but only expressed the opinions of a few individual SBC members (Page; Cornwall Alliance 2008).

Conclusion

[44] So where does this debate leave us? Creation care activists and skeptics are passionate about their respective positions on global warming. Both say they care about the environment, but disagree about the present state of the biosphere and how humans should practice environmental stewardship. Both groups’ arguments are biblically based. Activists largely accept a more inclusive and holistic biblical interpretation of Human/God/Nature relationships. Skeptics, on the other hand, are clearly comfortable with the dominion characterization of humans’ role in managing the earth. Activists largely accept the climate science experts’ assessments on global warming, while skeptics try to poke holes in it at every turn, using out of the mainstream sources to back them up. Some also state that global warming will be more beneficial than harmful. Creation care advocates believe that environmental externalities are unjust and cause developing world poverty, while advocates believe that poverty itself creates a greater propensity to pollute, a problem that economic development will remedy.

[45] It is clear that this debate will not end any time soon. However, the current picture of evangelicalism in America, which is becoming far more socially and politically diverse, and

the ever growing body of evidence that the climate crisis is real bodes well for creation care activists. The Pew Research study on religion in America reveals that rank and file evangelicals are theologically tolerant, care about environmental issues, and even support global warming legislation.

[46] This change is also reflected in the results of the 2008 election cycle. President Barak Obama garnered more support from evangelicals than Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry mustered in 2004 (26% in 2008 vs. 21% in 2004) and picked up 3 percentage points among people who go to church at least once a week (Pew Trust 2008a). Press coverage of religion, and especially coverage of abortion and gay marriage, was less prominent. What little coverage there was mainly focused on rumors that candidate Obama was a Muslim and the Rev. Jeremy Wright scandal (Pew Trust 2008b). Also, Obama made a deliberate attempt to reach out to evangelicals by asking Rev. Rick Warren, a creation care activist, to give the invocation at his January 2008 Inauguration ceremony. Finally, it is clear from both the new administration's rhetoric and staff appointments that climate change skeptics can no longer count on senior government support for their political and scientific agenda.

[47] However, it is important to remember that dedicated creation care activists still make up only small minority of evangelical elites. They have amassed allies from the political and theological left but have a long way to go before they can make real inroads into the leadership circles of major evangelical denominations. In December 2008, creation care activist Richard Cizik was forced out of his official position with the National Association of Evangelicals. Also, the skeptics organization, the Cornwall Alliance has embarked on a new campaign entitled, "We Get It," to reinforce their claim that global warming is not caused by human activities. Finally, partnerships with the Sierra Clubs and World Wildlife Funds of the world and participation in ecumenical gatherings that include supporters of more theologically radical Christian activists may garner even more suspicion than support from some evangelicals. Also critical to making any progress on this issue is convincing skeptics that overwhelming scientific evidence confirming global warming cannot be ignored. If they can be converted, the road to cooperation will be come much smoother.

Caveats and Opportunities for Future Research

[48] There a number of additional avenues for research suggested by this analysis. First, this paper only looks at evangelicalism in the United States. Evangelicalism is a growing worldwide movement. It would be interesting to explore how evangelical groups in other parts of the world are confronting environmental challenges. Second, there is a paucity of scientific polling data on evangelicals and environmentalism that additional polling and public opinion research could remedy. Third, this analysis does not fully explore the political mobilization techniques used by creation care activists and skeptics to push their agendas, both on Capitol Hill and among rank and file voters. Much more attention has been given to the latter but not the former. Fourth, while creation care activists are pushing hard for stronger domestic legislative responses to global warming and related problems, it is still unclear how supportive they are of concerted U.N. or other international organization sponsored multinational initiatives. Activists frequently quote research findings made by foreign scientific organizations, but the Kyoto Protocol or related global governance

activities are rarely mentioned in their statements or rhetoric (except by evangelical scientists). Fifth, it would be interesting to find out whether creation care activists and their parishioners actually practice what they preach in terms of living more sustainable lifestyles. Creation care activists assert that all Christians are charged to take personal moral responsibility for the environmental effects of their own person actions. Do creation care adherents take this message seriously in their daily lives? This last question is perhaps the most important of all, because legislation alone will not fix the climate crisis. How does the environmental performance of creation care advocates compare to other religious and secular environmental groups, many of which also use various types of moral appeals to get members interested in reducing their carbon footprints?

Appendix

Evangelical Elites, Creation Care and Global Warming: Avocate and Skeptic Value Positions

| Issue | Creation Care Advocates ⁴ | Creation Care Skeptics ⁵ |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Basic global warming science | Accepts with reservations, especially long term historical data | Skeptical of hypothesis, evidence lacking/accept alternative explanations, science |
| Dominion -vs- “tending” emphasis | Tending | Dominion |
| End of Times and the environment | End of Times may come, but God expects stewards to help enhance the earth to assist final establishment of His kingdom | End is near and God will provide a new Kingdom on Earth |
| God created the Earth and “owns it” | Yes | Yes, but humans practice secondary ownership |
| Warming predictions | Warming brings great cost and suffering | If warming happens, it could be bring more benefits than costs |
| Evaluating climate change risk | Precautionary principle/evidence sufficient to begin action | Warming harms overstated, adaptation cost will hurt poor |
| Global warming effect on poor | Warming effect negative, felt most by poor/developing world | Warming effect should be more positive than negative for poor/ costly adaptation policies hurt poor |
| Free market approach to warming? | Support in principle triple bottom accounting/current economic model causes economic inequality | Support voluntary approaches that expand economic globalization, encourage developing world development/negative externalities discounted |
| Eco-justice | Supports eco-justice approach to help groups under greatest environmental stress | Free market growth will alleviate environmental harms/inequality inevitable and acceptable |
| Government regulation role | Support limited regulation with incentive based system | Opposed to government regulation |

⁴ Sources include DeWitt (1994) EEN (1994a, 1994b, 2003); Noah’s Ark Foundation; NEA (2004a, 2004b); ECI (2006a, 2006b); Restoring Eden; Southern Baptist Convention (2007b).

⁵ Sources include Beisner; Cornwall Alliance (2000a, 2000b, 2006); NEA (2003, 2006); Southern Baptist Convention (2007a); Focus on the Family; Page.

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Overall state of the environment | Environmental quality is declining in almost all spheres | Environmental quality is actually improving, living standards better, less pollution/Higher growth leads to better protection |
| Materialism and overconsumption | Overconsumption causes moral decline of society and destroy environment | Capitalism and industrialization are primarily responsible for current prosperity of nations |
| Earth's resources are finite/need sustainable use | Yes | No, humans are resourceful, will find new ways to provide for needs with God's help. God created an abundant earth. |
| Acceptance of Evolution | No, but do accept recent period climate science | Reject evolution and climate science that depends on it. |
| Christian relation/nature dichotomy | Nature is sacred and should be protected because God created it | God created nature, but gave humans right to practice domination over it |
| Feelings about cooperation secular groups | Yes, seen as necessary to work for common policy changes | Question working with secular groups/sign of pantheism/new age thinking |
| Scriptural statements relating to environment | Interpret as God's reinforcement of need to nurture nature, nature has intrinsic value | Believe that activists misinterpret nature passages, take them out of context |
| Freedom and liberty | Freedom should be balanced with responsibility for sustainable stewardship | Freedom and free markets are God's chosen system, are most responsible for bringing material wealth to world while helping the environment |
| Intergenerational equity | Unsustainable practices rob children of future access to resources | Express confidence that new technologies will solve future resource constraints |

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