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Conservation and Environmental Sustainability Are Evangelicals Enemies or Friends?

by
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Readers of the *Public Justice Report* need to know about a very worthwhile exchange of ideas over conservation and environmental sustainability in two issues of the journal *Conservation Biology*, beginning in April, 2005 (pp. 290-294) and concluding in the December issue (pp. 1685-1698).

The discussion was kicked off by David W. Orr, a professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College, who called attention to a close connection between apocalyptic evangelicals and the current Bush administration's anti-environmental orientation. Interestingly, said Orr, both conservation biologists and right-wing Evangelicals seem to agree "that things are going to hell in the proverbial hand basket." But whereas the evangelicals he criticizes seem to welcome the idea of the end of the world and Christ's return, conservationists feel compelled to try to conserve the natural world.

Orr is skeptical, however, about the consistency of right-wing evangelical attitudes. After all, if the end is near, "why bother to add another few percent to the gross national product?" The alliance between certain evangelicals and conservative Republicans, Orr thinks, is not grounded in deep theology; it is "more about holding power to the end than it is about consistency."

Do all evangelicals stand in the same anti-conservation camp? Orr will not go that far. "Could one be a right-wing evangelical, for example, and a good conservation biologist? Having known a few, the answer is yes," he says. However, the few who fit this description are odd ones and in order to stand where they do requires "heroic intellectual acrobatics" to reconcile "religious doctrine at the extreme with the goals of conservation."

Merely criticizing right-wing evangelicals is not enough, however, says Orr. Conservation biologists have their own problem. They have been busy for decades documenting the degradation of the world's ecosystems, but "we seem tongue-tied when we consider the deeper questions about the causes and forces driving biotic

impoverishment and climate change.” Conservationists need more than a technical commitment to science; they need to understand why people “seek the consolations of religion. In other words, we lack both a deep explanation for what ails us and a larger cosmology that resonates with the public. Persons of scientific inclination are hesitant to trace problems back to a source labeled ‘sin’ but have not attempted to join the relevant sciences together to develop a coherent and plausible alternative story of our ecological maladjustments, thereby leaving much to evangelicals.”

What to do about the current problems and conflicts? Orr says that one option is for conservationists simply to keep on doing their scientific work until others wake up. A second strategy is “to be nice, tolerant, and attempt to start a reasonable dialogue” with right-wing evangelicals. A third strategy is to get tough, to call a spade a spade and to call Christian fundamentalists to account for their dangerous attitudes and conduct. Without choosing one of the three strategies, Orr nonetheless concludes, “I do not know whether the sciences broadly can come together to tell a compelling, authentic, and life-oriented story of our human sojourn to replace those now circulating about the saved and the unsaved and the end times and Armageddon. What I do know is that time for reason and reasonableness is running short.”

Orr’s brief essay is followed in the same issue by generally supportive comments from Rick Flood of the Riveredge Nature Center in Newburg, Wisconsin and John B. Cobb Jr., a theologian in Claremont, California. Cobb hopes, however, that Orr will not take a confrontational approach toward evangelicals as mainline church leaders did in the past. The situation may not be as bleak among evangelicals as Orr implies. “We should recognize,” says Cobb, “that, among Christians active in movements that respect the ‘integrity of creation’ and who wish to protect declining species, evangelicals are often in the lead.”

In the December issue of the journal, there are four responses to Orr from evangelicals, followed by a last word from Orr. David M. Johns, at the school of government of Portland State University (Oregon), argues that Orr and Flood were simplistic in identifying evangelicals with fundamentalists and with the conservative wing of the Republican Party. Moreover, there needs to be a dialogue between conservationists and evangelicals, not confrontation. Evangelicals are not all opposed to conservation and they can be mobilized for action.

David Henderson, a philosopher and wildlife/fisheries professor at Texas A&M, goes even further than Johns. Evangelicals *are* conservationists, he says. He challenges Orr’s diagnosis “that the apocalyptic tendencies of evangelical theology make believers complacent and thus complicit to environmental degradation.” As evidence, Henderson points to the statement released last year by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) titled “For the Health of the Nation: an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” a statement that calls for creation care and wise environmental protection. One of the committee members who wrote it is David Neff, editor of *Christianity Today*, a prominent evangelical magazine, says Henderson. Orr simply has a wrong picture of evangelicals.

Simon Stuart, who works with the Biodiversity Assessment Initiative of Conservation International, says that many conservation biologists like himself see truth in Orr's criticism of evangelicals. Stuart is writing on behalf of 30 Christian conservationists whose names are listed at the end of his article. But "three aspects of [Orr's] argument significantly disappoint us," writes Stuart. The first is Orr's misunderstanding of science and religion. Second, is Orr's mistaken basis for identifying evangelicals with right-wing political conservatives. The third is that by generalizing too much and calling for confrontation "Orr will only fuel a conflict that will be damaging to conservation in the long term."

First, according to Stuart, Orr "is trying to make science do something that it can never do." Stuart and his colleagues agree with Flood that "the case for sustainability is ultimately a moral one based on a view that life—including the lives of future generations of species—is indeed precious." A movement to conserve nature cannot be mustered by groups of scientists cooperating in doing science. Second, Orr mistakenly implies that evangelicals are almost all alike, but that is not the case. Among other things, says Stuart, "evangelicals are not united in a belief that the universe as we know it will be destroyed at the end of time." But most seriously, Stuart objects to Orr's call for confrontation between conservation scientists and evangelicals. Conservationists need evangelicals. "Christian theology can provide the conservation movement not only with the basis for much-needed hope, but it can provide the promise of the presence of the Creator God working with us in our seemingly weak and inadequate conservation efforts. It is perhaps time for secular conservationists to learn from those they seem to fear the most."

Finally, Fred Van Dyke, from the biology department of Wheaton College and a board member with Stuart of A Rocha USA, a Christian conservation organization, takes issue with the tone and approach of Orr's essay. Orr's piece "obscures rather than illuminates our ability to perceive and understand our neighbors and allies in conservation for who they really are and fails to treat them as we would like to be treated ourselves." Van Dyke mentions some of the "more than 40 Christian organizations" in the U.S. today that are working for environmental conservation, many of which are evangelical. These groups in turn are spawning and have been inspired by a "growing body of theological and ethical literature on environmental stewardship." Conservation biologists "do not practice conservation simply because we possess the technical expertise to do it." The Society of Conservation Biologists itself was formed with an ethical and not merely a scientific mission to protect, maintain, and restore the earth's biodiversity. Evangelicals are offering this kind of inspiration and motivation for conservation and should be applauded for doing so.

In his final word, David Orr challenges but also accepts some of the criticism of his original essay, but he wonders whether his evangelical respondents are as willing to challenge the "increasingly militant fundamentalist Christians" whom he was criticizing as they are him. If so, then Orr asks, "how is it going? Are you making headway? Are they listening?"

What I found missing in the exchange was a deeper criticism of the roots of the modern quest for economic and technological development that lies at the root of environmental degradation. It is not George W. Bush and right-wing Republicans, after all, who just invented environmental exploitation. Nor is it Christian fundamentalists who came up with a theology for disregarding conservation. Christians from the earliest era have been driven both to care for creation and to develop it, and they, as many others, have both succeeded and failed to balance the two drives. Part of what created the modern period of history was the break-away faith of Enlightenment rationalism that turned human energies toward mastery and exploitation of nature as a means of securing human power and autonomy. To be sure, many Christians have contributed to the kind of exploitation that now endangers our environment. But the dominant rationalist and technological quest for mastery is not a monopoly of right-wing conservatives and evangelicals. Democrats as well as Republicans want job growth and scientific achievement. Secularists and liberal Christians as well as evangelicals promote technological achievements.

Orr needs to take a longer view of our historical situation, and evangelicals do need to do more to develop a biblically grounded ethic as well as scientific expertise to advance a wise and careful approach to human development that can be sustainable and conserving. Doing all of this will require dialogue and cooperation among many camps, but some constructive confrontation along the way may help to wake up all of us to the looming disasters awaiting us and our children if we do not become better stewards of God's creation.

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For further reading on this subject:

Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998)

James W. Skillen, "Liberalism and the Environment," in Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

"For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" (Washington, D.C.: NAE, 2004).