

For the Love of God—or Gaia

Growing up in a conservative suburb in Minnesota with parents from very conservative North Dakota gave me a somewhat biased view of environmentalism. I learned not to litter, to recycle, and to plant trees, but I was given the impression that ultimately, environmentalism meant chaining oneself to bulldozers and camping out in the tops of trees for months. In my early days, I associated the environmental movement with images from the 1960s and 1970s of tree-hugging and Greenpeace button-touting hippies in demonstrations to save rainforests and whales. I didn't learn anything about the Clean Air Act or Clean Water Act that those "hippies" helped instigate, or the effect on politics and legislation that the environmental movement had, until my senior year in high school. And by that time, most of the great strides made by the environmental movement were already ancient history. The images I grew up with have helped create a stigma around the environmental movement in the minds of many conservative Americans—a stereotype that presumes that everyone who shows interest in protecting the environment is a radical liberal.

Today, conservative Americans are beginning to overcome to the stigmas associated with the environmental movement with the coming of a new Christian movement called "creation care." Discussed in previous *Grist* articles by Amanda Griscom Little, the "creation care" movement is becoming more and more influential. Concern for the world's environment is increasing among the conservative Christian, especially as warnings of global warming nightmares come true in the most intense tropical storm period on record. This change among conservatives comes at the perfect time for the environmental movement, which has been at a

standstill for years on the issue of global warming. *Grist's* series on the debate over the “death of environmentalism” has already pointed out that without any legislation passed by Congress and a conservative majority looming in all three branches of government, the future of the modern environmental movement looks dim. Environmentalists agree that significant alterations must be made to the entire system if environmentalism as an effective voice in society is to be saved. To revive environmentalism, an alliance with the Christian conservatives who are “going green” might be just the unique catalyst the group needs. This paper will pull together the two previous *Grist* series on the debate around what needs to change in today’s environmental movement, and on conservative Christians’ changing views, and finally it will propose an alliance based on these two opponents’ unexpectedly similar goals.

The Death of Environmentalism: Time to Say Goodbye?

No matter how they differ on most issues, almost all environmental activists will agree on one thing: they are frustrated. In the past fifteen years, no legislation has been passed, no gains have been made, and alliances have been weakened. The current ineffective strategies have not brought environmentalists any closer to that lofty goal of cutting carbon emissions by 70 percent. At least, that is the argument of Michael Shellenberger and Ted Norhaus in their essay, “The Death of Environmentalism.” Shellenberger and Norhaus’ (S&N) analysis states that modern environmentalism is virtually dead as a result of lack of progress on global warming, today’s biggest issue. Without a broad, inspirational vision, successful strategies, or strong alliances, environmentalism has become a special interest group without deep support for their issues (Shellenberger & Norhaus 4). The strong debate within the environmental community that S&N have stirred up with their analysis can be summarized by a comparison of the essay with a response to it written by Carl Pope, president of the Sierra Club.

S&N argue that environmentalism should “die” in order to make room for a new, progressive movement with widely defined interests. With a broader progressive view, they argue, environmentalists will gain the support of other important factions, such as labor, industry, and minorities, and will be able to actually pass effective legislation by cooperating with those groups. S&N feel strongly that by undertaking issues that wouldn’t traditionally be classified as “environmental” in order to gain allies on legislation, the environmental movement can deepen the support for their initiatives (S&N 5).

The idea that environmentalism is dead is understandably controversial. Carl Pope disagrees strongly, stating that modern environmentalism is progressive and is in fact one of the most successful parts of progressivism (Little, “Over” 1). He argues that all justice-focused progressive movements have been failing in the last decade, not just environmentalism; therefore the problem is not limited to environmentalism. There is no need to completely redefine environmental issues or the environmentalist’s self-image, thus “killing” environmentalism; instead energy should be put towards broadening the progressive image. In contrast to S&N, he believes that environmentalism is taking the right steps towards progressivism (Little, “Over” 1).

Pope agrees, however, that environmentalism has not been successful in the area of global warming in the past decade, or in inspiring the public to value the environment. He also agrees that the strategies of the right are much more successful than those of environmentalists and the progressives in general. Pope feels, like S&N, that a strong vision to inspire support in the fight against global warming is long overdue, but the failure to provide a strong vision is related to the complexity of the issue rather than dysfunctions in the environmental “family” (Pope 1-2).

S&N are very direct in their definition of environmentalism's problems. They say that the largest problem is strategy. The movement seems to have a formulaic approach to solving issues that does not work, at least not in today's political environment on today's hot issue—global warming. The strategy is to first define a problem as environmental, then find a technical solution, and finally convince legislators to adopt that technical solution as a law (S&N 5). S&N argue that this strategy isn't big enough for an issue like global warming; that to tackle a problem with its magnitude a simple technical solution isn't enough. They state that to solve this massive issue, an inspiring solution that changes our way of life is in order (S&N 4). Part of that broad solution is strong alliances with other progressives, something Pope agrees with.

Another part of the problem with environmentalist politics is the success of the opposition. S&N state that by setting the terms of debate, conservatives can gain the upper hand on any issue. They argue that progressives need to redefine their strategy in order to better combat the strength of conservatives, and completely redefine what constitutes an environmental issue. If environmentalists are willing to provide support for a variety of issues, S&N believe, the allies they form on those issues will provide deeper levels of support for the more traditionally "environmental" issues (S&N 5). Pope sees a problem with this approach: if environmentalists lose their focus on the environment, who will be left to protect it?

S&N, reflexively, see a problem with Pope's response. In one of their most controversial statements, they argue that environmentalists see themselves as separate from and higher than nature; they are protectors of this "thing" that is the environment (S&N 5). This self-image is bad, S&N believe, because it strictly limits the scope of environmental problems to those separate from humans. This, then, is where the problem arises with global warming. It is an environmental issue, but to solve it requires immense human involvement and cooperation.

In sum, the debate over the “death of environmentalism” is concerns whether environmentalism is completely ineffective, or whether it can be saved. S&N clearly believe that its days are at an end, while many leaders in the community stick by their life’s work and say that with new approaches, their beloved movement can be redeemed. In order to save the movement, effective changes must be made quickly before the movement is sacrificed on the cross of disagreement.

Onward, Christian Soldiers: The Spread of “Creation Care”

In Christian communities around the nation, a new movement has been building. Many Christians provide help and relief for hurricane victims, and now some are helping the cause in a very different way—by taking a stand against global warming. Many Christian groups are “going green” with global initiatives to be better stewards of creation—a movement called “creation care,” with campaigns to limit carbon emissions with legislation, and even with protests against carbon-consuming SUV’s. The unique thing about these movements is that many of the people involved are environmentalist’s political enemies: the Bush-supporting conservatives.

A decade ago, a group of world leaders in both the field of economics and the community of Christians joined for a conference on the role of Christians in today’s market economy. This Oxford conference, which produced the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, involved members from every extreme of political opinion and discussed wide-ranging issues from poverty to free-market structure (Schlossberg 3). The declaration clearly states the agreed policy of the conference members on the role of humans in the world: to “work as God’s stewards in the creative, faithful management of the world, recognizing that they are responsible to God for all they do with the world and to the world” (Schlossberg 10). Although global warming was not quite as pressing of an issue in 1994 as it is today, it did get some mention at

the conference. “When we abuse and pollute creation, as we are doing in many instances, we are poor stewards and invite disaster in both local and global eco-systems” (Schlossberg 12-13). The declaration has had little effect on environmental politics or society in subsequent years, but it represents the beginnings of the trend.

In the past year, a much more influential group has picked up on the campaign against global warming. The National Association of Evangelists (NAE), led by Ted Haggard and Richard Cizik, is a huge and very powerful group in US politics. Its members are some of the strongest supporters of the Republican Party and George Bush. In the last election, the NAE’s 30 million members provided unified, widespread, and most importantly *deep* support for the Republican president. And now, the group has put out a statement calling for Christians to live eco-friendly lives and for the government to change its environmentally degrading policies, especially on global warming.

NAE’s president Ted Haggard puts forth a strong opinion on “creation care.” “The environment is a values issue,” he states in an article printed in the Washington Post, “There are significant and compelling theological reasons why it should be a banner issue for the Christian right” (Harden 1). The statement released by NAE clearly follows this idea: “Because clean air, pure water, and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation” (Harden). But the most inspiring reason to protect the environment comes from Scripture: “the Lord God took man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2.15).

Richard Cizik, vice-president of NAE, is also outspoken in his support of “creation care,” which has become an integral part of his faith. He was “converted” in an experience quite like the evangelical’s conversion to Christ at an Oxford conference by Sir John Houghton, a retired

Oxford professor of atmospheric physics. Now, Cizik is working to open the eyes of the rest of his constituents to the importance of creation care in their faith. In an interview with Little, printed in one of the earlier-mentioned articles in *Grist*, Cizik explains “creation care.” “It is simply our articulation of a biblical doctrine, which is that we are commissioned by God the Almighty to be stewards of the earth” (Little, “Crisis” 2).

The NAE leaders’ involvement does not stop at policy reports or lobbying. These driven and determined folk lead by action as well, with hybrid cars, solar power, and with protests of all sorts. Cizik pushed for mercury concentration controls at a pro-life rally. He also joined fellow leaders in the community for a unique campaign called “What Would Jesus Drive?” which protested the sale of SUV’s. The “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign was led by local clergy and families in Massachusetts, and it received a lot of media attention because its members were so traditionally conservative (Gardner 1). The campaign really scared Detroit, according to involved member Bill McKibben, and showed the nation that some Christians aren’t afraid of being associated with protests.

The fear of radicalism is the main obstacle to a successful coalition between conservative Christians and the environmental community. The Christian movement is called “creation care,” because “it does not annoy conservative Christians for whom the word "environmentalism" connotes liberals, secularists and Democrats” (Harden 1). Obviously, that stigma is still influential among conservatives. Even Cizik, who is willing to go to far lengths to reach his moral goals, still gives the stigma full credit in saying that “subscribing to the "creation care" agenda does not mean people "have to become liberal weirdoes”” (Little, “Crisis” 1). He has declined alliance with the Sierra Club for now, saying that neither the movement nor NAE’s constituents are ready for an alliance with such an “environmental” group. He is confident that

they could at some point in the future, however (Little, "Crisis" 2). Now, the question is whether environmentalists will see the promise of the Christian movement and bring about the redemption of their dying movement.

Christian Meets Environmentalist: A Match Made in Heaven

The dying environmental movement needs a strong vision, deep and wide-spread alliances, and an effective political strategy on global warming. They have a long-term goal of stopping the spread of global warming and protecting the natural world. The Christian conservatives are a large group consisting of many different social classes, are very powerful in politics, and have arguably the strongest vision of the future of any group in society. They also have a goal to prevent global warming and limit destruction of the natural world. Saying that the two groups would serve each other well is almost an understatement.

If the environmental community can convince the Christian conservatives to join forces, the effects could be astounding. Not only would they have the support of a huge, remarkably unified group, but they would also have a means of splitting the political force of their opponents. With such similar goals on the issue of global warming, the Christians would be able to further their moral obligation to creation, and the environmentalists would gain key deep support without compromising their focus on environmental issues. The alliance allows for a compromise on the "Death of Environmentalism" debate and provides an effective strategy for accomplishing the goals of all parties involved. It's almost too good to be true.

In a recent article in *The American Prospect*, environmentalist and Christian Bill McKibben supports the suggestion that Christians are just the ticket to inspiring change on the issue of global warming. He states that because global warming is such a large issue, environmentalism itself cannot deal with it alone. As he quite philosophically puts it, "the

political force that finally manages to take this issue on is the political force that also understands and helps to nurture the deep-rooted and unsatisfied American desire for real community, for real connection between people” (McKibben 2). He believes that conservative Christians are that force—perhaps unexpectedly, Christians can save not only the souls but also the goals of the environmental movement.

But what of that ever-present, anti-“liberal weirdo” stigma in conservative ideology? An article printed in *Zygon*, a journal of religion and science, on the history of the relationship between religion and science offers some optimistic suggestions. The author, Dee Carter, goes back to the time of the Enlightenment and discusses famous and influential scientists of that period as leaders of both the religious and emerging scientific communities. “The scientific establishment was a part of Christian culture, and so again Christianity can be seen as providing legitimization for scientific activities, and indeed activities with a marked ideological, coercive component” (Carter 7). She goes so far as to argue that Darwin’s views reflected contemporary theology; his theories attempted to show *how* the Creator made the world, not whether there was a Creator at all. The article shows clearly that science and religion do not have to be at odds with one another, but rather work together to provide a better understanding of the world and our existence (Carter 3). In a similar way, modern environmentalists and Christians can work together to provide a vision of a positive existence in the world and to help realize that vision through campaigning against global warming.

At present, the environmentalists seem to have yet to see the light of the Christian movement. Once they do, however, they surely won’t turn away from it. Christians must be willing to put down their hypocritical stigmas and embrace the similarities between the goals of the two groups. If environmentalists can convince the general majority of Christians of their

legitimacy and effectiveness, cooperation will follow. The Christian movement may not save the souls of environmentalists, but if they can manage to see past the stereotypes and create a truly cooperative relationship, the collective soul of the environmental movement can certainly be saved.

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