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# A CHRISTIAN BASIS FOR ENVIRONMENTALISM

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## Abstract

Human action is contributing to a worldwide decrease in biodiversity and a decrease in the health of the world's ecosystems. Members of the Christian religion are poised to become frontrunners in the fight to restore the world's ecosystems and to pioneer responsible ecological practices. This paper explores the effect that humans have had on the environment and proposes reasons why Christians should engage in solving the most challenging ecological issues of the modern era. Our role as God's Image bearers in caring for Creation is reconceived in light of McFague's remythologization of the Creation model and by consideration of the Bebbington quadrilateral and Bookless' assimilation of it into evangelicalism which informs the Christian tradition of Creation care.

*Keywords:* climate change, evangelicalism, David Bookless, Sallie McFague, Lynn White

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## 1. Introduction

*Homo sapiens* are animals with a unique ability to influence ecology on a global scale. Through practices that lead to ecosystem degradation, biodiversity reduction, and climate change, humans have solidified their position in the history of the world as the most destructive living force [1]. Despite the consensus among the majority of scientists regarding these facts, there are still a few political pundits who reject the claim that human beings, by means of irresponsible and destructive actions, are responsible for the demise of the natural world; the blame has previously been reserved for natural phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis while ignoring the human contribution.

Assigning a single group to blame for these consequences of human action is difficult. Among the most noteworthy campaigns to assign blame for the degradation of the environment to a particular group came from Lynn White in his now famous essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. In the essay, White claims that Christianity, by nature of its historical influence over Science and modern technology, "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis [2]. White reasoned that because: a) Christianity had historically emphasized "man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over,

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nature” and b) because this ‘dominion mentality’ subsequently characterized modern science and technology, it is to blame for the consequences of the actions of Science and technology. Regardless of the validity of this line of reasoning, it is important to note because it reflects a notion that seemed to be empirically confirmed during the time in which White wrote: Christian beliefs *had* led to damaging ecological practices [3]. This premise has been further investigated by the sociologists Eckberg and Blocker, whose research shows that an individual’s affiliation with Christianity is inversely correlated with their concern for the environment [4].

Despite these indictments leveled against Christianity, a sense of optimism toward the future of Christian interaction with the environment is justified when one considers the premise that a change of Christian attitudes (e.g. repentance) can lead to a change in Christian practices (e.g. restitution), which have already been identified by White as being efficacious on a global scale. This prescription was predicted by White at the end of his work: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, *or rethink our old one*” [2] Here, we outline the ways in which human action has degraded the natural world, and propose a ‘rethinking’ of our old religion as a mechanism for restoring widespread ecological consciousness and responsible practice.

## **2. The current state of our ‘fallen’ world**

Every year, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) sponsors an analysis of the state of the planet and the impact of human activities around the globe called the ‘Living Planet Report’. ‘The Living Planet Report’ is among the most comprehensive, scientifically researched reports on the state of the planet. It presents its findings in the form of three indices: the Living Planet Index, the Ecological Footprint and the Water Footprint. The Living Planet Index is a measure of the health of the world’s biodiversity, while the Ecological Footprint and the Water Footprint measure the demands that human beings put on the earth’s natural resources [5]. Since the late twentieth century, human beings have used resources at a rate that exceeds the biocapacity of the Earth. This means that humans use the Earth’s natural resources faster than the Earth can replenish them; therefore, ecosystems suffer. In 2007, humans exceeded the biocapacity of the Earth by a factor of 1.5, meaning that it will take the Earth 1.5 years to replenish the resources used and absorb the carbon dioxide waste generated during one year.

This pattern of consumption is having obvious, widespread and detrimental effects on the world’s ecosystems. The WWF calculated that the Living Planet Index, a measure of the world’s overall biodiversity, has declined by 30% since 1970 [5]. This severe and significant decline in biodiversity was demonstrated based on data gathered from 7,953 populations of 2,544 different species worldwide. Biologically, diversity is synonymous with stability and productivity. Decreases in the planet’s overall biodiversity can be thought of as a

decline in the overall health and productivity of the Earth. Thus, it is in the best interest of the planet and those who are in complete dependence on its resources (e.g. *all* of us) to reverse the harmful trend in biodiversity reduction.

The trends in biodiversity appear even worse when considered through a more geographically narrow scope. The index of biodiversity in tropical regions worldwide has decreased by 60% since 1970. The index for terrestrial biomes has decreased by 25% in the same length of time. The Living Planet Index for freshwater species declined by 35%, and more alarmingly by 70% in tropical freshwater ecosystems due to commercial overfishing [5].

The decline of biodiversity and increase in consumption of natural resources toward the end of the twentieth century are accompanied by an increased amount of carbon dioxide that has been emitted into the atmosphere due to human activities. Scientists from the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center at Oakridge National Laboratory have calculated that of the 337 billion tons of carbon dioxide waste that have been released into the atmosphere as a byproduct of fossil fuel consumption and cement production since the mid eighteenth century, at least “half [of the emissions] have occurred since the mid 1970s” [6]. Ecologists categorize carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas, which signifies that its release into the atmosphere amplifies the intensity of global warming. Scientists have cited this amplification as a chief reason why humans remain culpable for the problem of global climate change [7].

Whether or not these patterns are specifically and directly the result of *Christian* beliefs and practices, the current data on the state of the earth’s environment indisputably demonstrates that humans are consuming resources at an unsustainable rate; as a result, the health and productivity of the environment are being rapidly diminished. Christians are called to be image bearers of God on earth to show that *all* of Creation belongs to Him. Creation is not just a resource for us to exploit.

### **3. A Christian call to action**

In contrast to Lynn White’s thesis, there are multiple fundamental reasons why religious groups in general, and Christians in particular, should incorporate care for the environment into their religious practices. First, there are many ethical principles which members of widespread faith groups (e.g. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Christians) share with members of environmental organizations. These premises include an aversion toward hoarding resources, the recognition that all things are interconnected and interdependent, a predilection for expressing reverence of all life, the importance of bearing witness to fundamental truths and accepting personal responsibility, and the need for social justice and equality [8]. From the outset, it is apparent that the fields of Theology and environmentalism share many more concordances than differences in regard to an ethics of environmental care. Nevertheless, promulgating conservation initiatives by religious groups requires sound ecological knowledge, governance and policy ... not merely religious zeal [9].

Despite this overlap of values, we shall focus on the basis for environmentalism that can be derived solely from Christian principles. This argument will begin with the basis for ecological care found in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Old Testament) and then proceed to the basis found in the Christian New Testament. Such theological reflection provides the religious foundation and motivation for a call to action. Nevertheless, it does *not* provide the knowledge, governance and policy needed to do the right thing. To provide those things requires that we educate people how to be better ‘stewards of Creation’. In more modern terms, we need to educate Christians to be better ecologists, better environmentalists, better climatologists and better conservationists. Additionally, we need to eschew, perhaps even condemn, consumerism.

#### **4. Eco-justice as a Christian calling**

The teachings of the Old Testament point to the principle that God requires humans to act in a just manner in relation to one another. This principle is enunciated throughout scripture with examples in Micah 6.8: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (NIV), and in Psalm 82.3: “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.” (NIV)

These Scriptures issue calls for justice and mercy to the weak and the poor. But the more castigating demonstration of God’s repugnance towards those who give their religious traditions a higher priority than their execution of justice is found in Amos 5.21-24: “I hate, I despise your religious festivals, your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!” (NIV)

As is later made evident by the Gospels (Matthew 23.23 and Luke 11.43), Christ refers to these passages reaching back into his Hebrew heritage for a strong framework of promoting social justice. Scripture stresses the importance of right relation between humans, as well as the role of God as the liberator of the oppressed. Humans, because they are endowed with the image of God, must be seen as agents of this liberation and are obligated to work for the benefit of the oppressed.

A facet of environmentalism called the ‘eco-justice’ movement relates the Christian call for social justice with pertinent ecological realities. Essentially, the eco-justice movement seeks to embrace the validity of ecological concerns as part of the Church’s growing concern for social issues [3]. The theologian Christopher Southgate succinctly connects social justice and action that leads to environmental degradation: “Climate change afflicts the poorest and most

vulnerable populations in our world, raising issues of justice, and although its precise unfolding remains contentious, human prudence requires consideration of a wide range of actions to restrict its extent” [10]. Not only is the exploitation of resources contrary to Christian principles, but it leads to unjust conditions for the poorest of the poor. This chain of events clearly contradicts the Christian call for justice and right relation between humans. The eco-justice movement emphasizes that an integral part of being in right relation with one another is considering how one’s interactions with the environment influence the livelihood of one’s fellow humans. This aspect of the eco-justice movement offers an anthropogenic basis for proper ecological action.

Opposing this approach is the critique that the eco-justice movement merely implies that just action toward the environment is important only if it minimizes harm to fellow humans. Human beings, then, would be of primary importance, with nonhuman species obtaining their importance by means of their agency in providing for the good of humanity. Despite this anthropogenic facet of eco-justice, the movement has more to say about right relation to the Creation than can be substantiated solely on an anthropogenic basis. Eco-justice, apart from emphasizing the necessity of care for the environment on the grounds that it benefits poor and neglected human societies, also emphasizes the unity of *all* Creation in God. This unity makes it possible for justice to be manifested “in one’s relationship to other people or to the nonhuman elements of Creation” [11]. Consequently, the eco-justice movement calls for ethical action toward *all* of Creation, both human and non-human, and places the necessity of caring for the *entire* environment at the core of social justice concerns. . . not just for the benefit of humans.

## **5. An evangelical remythologization**

Even if the Lynn White thesis *is* valid, there is no reason why Christianity needs to continue supporting his hypothesis. One activism-oriented branch of Christianity that *could* become a major positive influence in Creation care is evangelicalism. However, before it can become this influence, it must be preceded by what the theologian Sallie McFague calls a “remythologization of the relationship between God and the world” [12]. McFague emphasizes the importance of doing away with ‘anachronistic’ models of this relationship and proposing models that support healthy, ethical practices for the modern era [12, p. 3]. Exploitation of the Creation for personal or anthropocentric gain *must* be replaced with care and concern for *all* creatures.

Evangelicalism needs to become fully engaged in this Creation care movement; the world’s major religious leaders including Pope Benedict XVI, the Dalai Lama and the archbishop of Canterbury have already concurred. But perhaps the *most* invested in saving Creation is the Orthodox Church led by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. His commitment to environmental activism is so widely known that he has been called the Green Patriarch. He has carried the environmental banner farther than most by

considering Creation care a religious imperative and calling on all Orthodox Christians to repent of the *sinfulness* of not protecting the planet [13]. He particularly castigated the “powerful of the world”, calling for them to have a renewed mind that no longer destroys the planet for short-term interest and profit; but he also calls on all of us to “repentance for our sinfulness in destroying the world instead of [merely] working to preserve and sustain its ever-flourishing resources reasonably and carefully” [Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, *Encyclical of His All-Holiness for the Church New Year*, September 1 2012, Prot. No. 718]. His All-Holiness points out that what we do to animals, air, water and land is not mere folly . . . *it is sin*.

Similarly, this journal has been particularly invested in Creation care as a theological calling; several papers in particular have been seminal. From a virtue ethics perspective, Melin argued for a reconsideration of Deane-Drummond’s cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance for an environmental ethic [14]. To these he adds *wisdom*, considers *benevolence*, but further develops the virtue of *respect* as a cardinal environmental ethic for Christians. Doncel expands Hefner’s created co-creator concept by adding the kenotic nature of Christ and God’s *creatio continua* via evolution to engage human technology as a creative call (*creation appellata*) to positively affect cosmic, interpersonal, eschatological and global domains [15]. In a theologically rich paper, Sandu details Orthodox understandings of our relationship with the Creation where the goal is to restore our true rational inner nature currently corrupted by sin and to be a part of liberating the whole of Creation from the bonds of selfishness, which it shares in solidarity with us [16]. Sandu echoes Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I by calling us to a purification of the mind and the soul via eliminating our passions for material goods.

Clearly, it is time that evangelicals get in line with this thinking as well. Evangelicals have some hurdles to overcome their sins against Creation. One of them is a minority eschatological view that Christ’s second coming negates any need for concern about the environment. A third of Americans think the spate of recent natural disasters portend eschatological turmoil. The majority of these are white evangelical Protestants (65%), but Catholics still make up twenty-one percent of this ‘end times’ group [L. Markoe, *Poll: More than one-third of Americans see signs of end times in extreme weather*, Religion News Service, 13 December 2012, online at <http://www.religionnews.com/faith/beliefs/Poll-More-than-one-third-of-Americans-see-signs-of-end-times-in-extreme-we>, accessed 7 March 2013]. The majority of Americans, religious or secular, are in line with the scientific position that extreme weather is a result of global warming, not a sign of a looming apocalypse. The danger with the apocalyptic fundamentalists, who see climate change as ‘God’s will’, is that they fail to accept the human causes of global warming and, consequently, refuse to be culpable for the very human habits and practices that actually cause climate change. It is time to reject fundamentalist misinterpretations of Johnine apocalyptic writing. Instead, we as the image bearers of God in Creation need to start working on the environmental apocalypses already here rather than imagine fiery ‘do overs’ to solve our

problems. Eschatology is one area where McFague's re-mythologization must take place.

What may also help in properly engaging evangelical Christians in Creation care is the defining and refining what should be meant by the term 'evangelical'. An analytic overview of evangelical values comes from the historian David Bebbington. Bebbington posits that evangelicalism be characterized by four fundamental beliefs that guide ethical practices. These beliefs are *biblicism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversionism* and *activism*: the four components of the Bebbington quadrilateral [17]. From this rather broad perspective, most Christian groups whether self-identified as evangelical or not, could fit the definition. The Reverend David Bookless offers pertinent insights on the evangelical perception of a proper environmental ethic in order to focus the view. Bookless proposes that if evangelicals would adhere to the full implications of the Bebbington quadrilateral, their mentality of interaction with the non-human Creation would shift away from solely a human-centered one as currently reflected by widespread evangelical practice [18].

As an example, Bookless considers the value of *biblicism*, which he defines as "a particular regard for the bible as the source of all spiritual truth" [18, p. 38] implying that interpretations of the Bible and God's will for humanity shape evangelical practices. Bookless contends that evangelicals have made errors in their biblical interpretation and should seek to reshape evangelical beliefs by examining the major themes of Scripture. Part of the problem is the reliance on personal interpretation of Scripture without proper theological insight (*sola scriptura* attitudes that result from the lack of a magisterium). But beyond this foundational concern, Bookless, by referring to theologian N.T. Wright, holds that early Christians saw history as composed of five different stages: Creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, and the age of the Church. Of these five stages of Biblical history identified by Wright, Bookless notes that only three find parallels within the values identified by the Bebbington quadrilateral. One can treat the evangelical value of *conversionism* as reflective of the fall stage of history, the value of *crucicentrism* as pertaining to Wright's Jesus stage of history, and the value of *activism* as correlating with the age of the Church. This signifies that evangelical theology, as characterized by Bebbington, lacks two of the key themes identified in Wright's narrative approach to scripture. Bookless suggests that a recovery of the themes of Creation and Israel is necessary in order for evangelical Christians to realize their full potential as champions of responsible environmental ethics.

Evangelical interpretation of the biblical Creation accounts have also been marred by emphasizing the dominion of humanity over the Creation and by interpreting the 'image of God' as a mark of distinction that is synonymous with supreme authority from God. This view is unbiblical. What the Creation accounts *actually* reveal is that man is charged with the responsibility to "reflect God's just and gentle rule towards the rest of Creation" [18, p. 42] Rather than the image of God being an anatomical structure, mental capacity, or a license to consume in an irresponsible manner, the image of God signifies the agency that

human beings have in fulfilling the task of caring for a Creation that belongs solely to God. As stated succinctly by Bookless, “To put it simply, to be in God’s image is to care for Creation in a Godly way” [18]

This shift in evangelical thinking for what it means to be made in the image of God is complemented by the most subtle aspects of the Creation narrative. For instance, the name of the first man, Adam, is derived from the term *adamah*, which means earth. This emphasizes that although humans are endowed with the image of God, we are still beings created by God from the same materials as all other aspects of the Creation. One way of capturing the Hebrew narrative’s word play would be to state that God created the human (or humanity) from humus. We are placed in Creation to be God’s image indicating that all of Creation is His, and our interaction with the nonhuman Creation should be as caretakers rather than exploiters. Also supporting this humble role for ‘humans from humus’ is Psalm 24.1, which states “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” (NIV)

The second major stage of biblical history that is neglected from the perspective of the Bebbington quadrilateral is the stage of Israel. Just as the theme of Creation sets the precedent that God has purposes for the whole created order, many passages that reference Israel in the Bible also emphasize the relationship between God, people and place. As stated by Bookless, “the story of Israel is centrally about how God’s purposes are to be worked out by a particular people in a particular place, or land” [18] The interactions of the Israelites are always described in relation to the land they occupy or the land they have been promised; this causes the reader to realize that caring for a particular locale by a chosen people is a significant component of Scripture. The theologian Alejandro García-Rivera supports this conclusion when he states that there is a great risk involved when “Science is divorced from the spiritual and Theology is divorced from the cosmic” [19].

Bookless summarizes the lessons that one should learn from both the Creation and Israel stages of the Bible: “the natural environment is seen not simply as the stage on which we act out our mission, but, is interlinked with humanity as the object of God’s mission through us” [18, p. 42]. Thus, it becomes clear why recovering these two themes would alter evangelical praxis. Rather than overemphasizing humanity’s distinction *from* Creation, the aforementioned adjustments to evangelical theology would require evangelicals to treat all of Creation as *essential* to God’s mission.

## 6. Restoring an evangelical ethic of ecology

As stated previously, the remaining three stages of biblical history find parallels in three components of the Bebbington quadrilateral. The focus of this paper will now shift to these New Testament themes in order to emphasize the compatibility of evangelical theology with a healthy ecological ethic. The first theme that we will look at is *crucicentrism*, which Bookless defines as “a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross” [19, p. 38]. Although the traditional

evangelical reaction to the value of *crucicentrism* has been to emphasize atonement in the relationship between God and humanity, a closer reading of Scripture advocates for the fact that God has plans to save *all* of Creation. This premise is supported by Paul in Colossians 1.20, which speaks of God's plans to reconcile *all things* to himself, "whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (NIV). Bookless also points to Romans 8 as support for the case that *all* of Creation will be redeemed. The evangelical value of *crucicentrism* provides environmental activists with the hope that their work will not be in vain. God has stated his intentions to redeem the earth, and so Christians can be assured that their call to be stewards of the Creation will be substantiated by the atoning work of Christ on the cross [19, p. 44]. The assurance that humans have in God's redemptive promise leads the theologian Peter Harris to claim that, "the Christian approach [to environmentalism]... is celebratory and grateful and hopeful [20].

The evangelical value of *conversionism*, which Bookless defines as "the belief that individual human beings need to be converted to Christ", parallels the biblical stage of the fall [18]. Essentially, *conversionism* recognizes that humanity has experienced a broken relationship with God, and thus redemption is a necessary component of the human condition. Moreover, it is an action that cannot be completed apart from Christ. *Conversionism* signifies that just as the relationship between humanity and God can only be redeemed by responding to the grace of God, the redemption of Creation will only be accomplished by humans who have accepted God's redemption. Romans 8.19-24 suggests that Creation has been waiting for the revealing of the sons of God to deliver it from the bondage of corruption to the liberty of glory found in the children of God. If we do our parts as God's image bearers, we will care for God's Creation so it no longer has to groan and travail in pain as we, and it, receive redemption. Thus, there will undoubtedly be a shift in evangelical ethics when evangelical theology is expanded to recognize the value of *conversionism* for the non-human Creation.

The last evangelical value that will be discussed is *activism*, which Bookless defines as "the belief that the gospel needs to be expressed in practical outcomes" [18]. This evangelical value parallels Wright's final stage of Biblical history: the age of the Church. Activism stems from an understanding of theology. If evangelicals take the preceding theological considerations into account, they will be supplied with a basis for acting in a caring and proper manner toward all of Creation. Evangelicals are familiar with the fact that God calls humans to be a part of His mission, as is evidenced by the evangelical priority of spreading the gospel to all of humanity. Once evangelicals realize that God's mission extends beyond the non-human Creation, they will be excellent candidates to assist in the fulfilling of that mission. McFague's hope for a remythologization of God's relationship with the whole world and *all things* in it would be completed.

## 7. Conclusion

Careless human activity is damaging the planet in many ways. Contrary to the claims of White, there are numerous fundamental bases for why Christianity should be seen as an ally of the environment rather than its oppressor. As posited by Lauren Kearns, “The problem is not with Christianity, but with not being true to Christianity” [3].

Whether it is through an appeal to social justice, an exploration of what it means to be endowed with the image of God, an understanding of the Creation as important to God’s mission, or through an emphasis on God’s redemption of all things, it is clear that Christian principles support ecological practices that benefit the earth and non-human life forms. Christ’s atonement is not merely extended to sinful humans but in order that *all things* should become drawn to him (Acts 3.21, Romans 8.19-23).

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