

Religious Leaders and Ecology: A Growing Force for Earth Healing

submitted by Fred Krueger, National Religious Coalition on Creation Care

Most seminaries in this century, regardless of denomination, have at best taught a skeleton of the historic Christian doctrines about creation.

The task of recovering a whole doctrine of creation or the relevance of Christianity to forests and their conservation involves more than academic study: It must also be an experiential journey into the heart of Christ while still in the world. Anyone who is serious about the challenge will soon discover that (1) the route is not well marked, (2) the map is often clearer in the historical past than in the present, (3) parts of the modern description are not well rooted in classical Christian theology, which means one must be careful to distinguish between that which is false and unworkable from that which is orthodox.

The following summary lists a few of the major public pronouncements by different Christian denominations and their leaders on a theology of creation:

Evangelicals

Reverend Billy Graham

We Christians have a responsibility to take the lead in caring for the earth.

Episcopal Church of America

Most Rev. Edmund Browning, Presiding Bishop

Unbridled consumerism now imperils the earth.... The environmental crisis, fueled by our abuse of the earth's resources, coupled with development needs for billions of people, and billions yet unborn, present us with an overwhelming dilemma. The problems of global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation and pollution of air, land and water are inseparably linked to unjust lifestyles. As a nation, we have been driven by overconsumption and we have failed to act as stewards.

Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey

Primate of the Church of England, 1996

Environmental responsibilities should be a first order contemporary moral concern of deep interest to Christians. ... Environmental challenges are unlikely to be met satisfactorily without the moral and spiritual motivation nurtured by the Churches.

Roman Catholic Church

Pope John Paul II

In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened... by a lack of respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty.

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past.... A new "ecological awareness" is beginning to

emerge, which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programs and initiatives. /Peace with God, #1

The ecological crisis is really a moral crisis.

A General Call for Ecological Conversion

We must therefore encourage and support the ecological conversion which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.

Man is no longer the Creator's steward, but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss. ... At stake is not only a physical ecology that is concerned with safeguarding the habitat of the various living beings, but a human ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator's plan.

5. In this rediscovered harmony with nature and with one another, men and women are once again walking in the garden of creation, seeking to make the goods of the earth available to all and not just to a privileged few, as the biblical jubilee suggests (cf. Leviticus 25:8-13, 23). Among those marvels we find the Creator's voice, transmitted by heaven and earth, by night and day: a language "with no speech nor words; whose voice is not heard" and which can cross all boundaries (cf. Psalm 19 [18]: 2-5).

Eastern Orthodox Church

Patriarch Bartholomew I

Our first task is to raise the consciousness of adults who most use the resources and gifts of the planet. Ultimately it is for our children that we must perceive our every action in the world as having a direct effect upon the future of the environment. ...

There is also an ascetic element in our responsibility toward creation. This asceticism requires a voluntary restraint in order for us to live in harmony with our environment.

We are called to work in humble harmony with creation and not in arrogant supremacy against it. Asceticism provides an example whereby we may live simply.

For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the forests, or destroying its wetlands...for humans to contaminate the Earth's water, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances these are sins. To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Dr. Herbert Chilstrom, Bishop

The adoption of statements on the environment by church councils is important.

But unless every local congregation actually carries out sound environmental practices in its buildings and in the homes of the members, these statements are worthless. Care of the earth -- our mandate from the Creator -- is the responsibility of us all.

Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice

Policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Adopted, August 28, 1993, Kansas City, Missouri

The idea of the earth as a boundless warehouse of resources has proven false and dangerous. Damage to the environment eventually will affect most

people through increased conflict over scarce resources, decline in food security, and greater vulnerability to disease. ... Action to counter degradation, especially within this decade, is essential to the future of our children and our children's children.

Reformed Church in America

Rev. Dr. Edwin G. Mulder, General Secretary

The local congregation is uniquely positioned to address the environmental crisis. They do not need to be convinced that this is a matter of faith, of morality and justice. They simply need to be challenged and given handles whereby they can put their faith to work.

Church of the Brethren

Rev. Dr. Donald Miller, General Secretary

Our attitude to the environment is ultimately a spiritual issue. Humanity is a part of the creation, and therefore the environment is a moment-by-moment reminder of God's graciousness to us. Even the small things we do to care for the environment can have a dramatic impact in their sum total. Every congregation should understand that care and respect for the environment is part of God's call in this generation.

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Dr. Carol Johnston

Upon re-reading the Bible to see what is there that relates to nature and eco-justice, our eyes are opened to how important creation is to the whole of the biblical witness. In this light, basic Christian doctrines take on new meaning.

United Methodist Church

General Conference resolution

The Christian Church should actively work to safeguard creation.

Evangelical Christians

Francis Schaeffer

If I am going to be in a right relationship with God, I should treat the things he has made in the same way he treats them.

John R. W. Stott

Christians should surely have been in the vanguard of the movement for environmental responsibility, because of our doctrines of creation and stewardship. Did God make the world? Does He sustain it? Has he committed its resources to our care? His personal concern for His own creation should be sufficient to inspire us to be equally concerned.

Reverend William Byron, SJ

President

Catholic University of America

The idea of stewardship is based on the first verse of the 24th Psalm: The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. From this first principle, both logic and theology come to the conclusion that we who inhabit the earth are managers, not owners. Congregations concerned about understanding and acting upon environmental issues are simply living their faith, a faith that calls for stewardship.

It was said of the earliest Christians that they turned the world upside down. Christians today need to join together in their environmental commitment to turn the world right side up.

Dr. Roberta Hestenes
President, Eastern College

Jewish statements

Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Torah and the Ancient Redwoods:

Headwaters Forest is the most significant unprotected ancient redwood forest on earth. This Headwaters story is not about the environment versus industry, or the environment versus jobs, or the environment versus private property. This story is about desecration. Desecration of ancient trees that have survived centuries and even millennia of drought, fire and infestation, but are helpless against the chain saw. Desecration of fish, birds, voles, salamanders, whose lives are interwoven with numerous other species of the forest. Perhaps nowhere is the web of interconnectedness more apparent than in the ancient forest.

How proud we are of our victories in the war with nature, proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, of the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats... Selling himself into slavery to things, man becomes a utensil that is broken at the fountain. ... It is when nature is sensed as mystery and grandeur that it calls upon us to look beyond it.

The Shalom Center

The Human Cost of Headwaters

When we desecrate *Adamah*, the earth, we endanger *Adam*, our very being. This is a powerful teaching in the sacred language of our tradition. The Hebrew word for human being is *adam*, and *adamah* is the word for the earth. Note how similar are the words. Indeed we are earth and earthling, -- not identical, but indeed intertwined. In the language itself, the medium of Creation, is contained the profound wisdom of our tradition that it is impossible to act on the earth without also acting on human beings.

Additional Extended Statements

Billy Graham: Evangelical Christians

It is not right for us to destroy the world God has given us. He has created everything; as the Bible says, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven . . ." (Acts 17:24). To drive to extinction something He has created is wrong, for He has a purpose for everything.

The Bible also reminds us that God is concerned about even the smallest creature. Jesus said, "...Yet not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matthew 10:29). In the Old testament there were numerous laws prohibiting the mistreatment of animals, and the Bible says that "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal . . . (Proverbs 12:10).

I am thankful for your concern about the environment (although you have probably already discovered that issues like this are seldom simple). However, I urge you not to let your concern crowd out an even more important issue that is your relationship with God. God not only created the plants and animals; He created you, and He wants you to come to know Him in a personal way. Open your life to Christ and His transforming power today.

Yes, our world is polluted and endangered. The real reason is because we have turned against God. Don't make that mistake in your own life, but put Christ first and build your life on the truth of His Word.

The Catholic Bishops of Appalachia

At Home in the Web of Life, A Pastoral Message, January, 1996

As we seek the path of sustainable community... it is helpful to remember that all creation... reveals the creative word of God. ... All creation is... a revelation of God to us.... After European civilization collapsed, monasteries became centers for regeneration -- ecologically, socially and spiritually. Now might not Christian communities become small centers of a sustainable path, small islands of creativity; and proclaimers of a culture of life.

In our present times the mighty wind of God's Spirit is stirring people's imaginations to find new ways of living together, based on the full community of life....

These sustainable communities will: conserve and not waste; be simpler but better; keep most resources circulating locally; create sustainable livelihoods; support family life; protect the richness of nature; develop people spiritually; and follow God's values. We urge the people of Appalachia, and people everywhere, to deepen their search for new ways to regenerate natural and social ecology, and thus to care for the poor and all of the Earth.... This would mean experimenting with solar energy and organic gardening, and other appropriate technologies, right in the local churches.

Roman Catholics
Pope John Paul II

In 1979 Pope John Paul II became the first Christian leader to address issues of ecology in the context of overconsumption. To an overflowing crowd at Yankee Stadium he called for a simpler way of life that reflected the ancient message of the Gospel.

Christians will want to be in the vanguard in favoring ways of life that decisively break with the exhausting and joyless frenzy of consumerism. This is not a question of slowing down progress, for there is no human progress when everything conspires to give full reign to self-interest, sex and power. We must find a simple way of living. For it is not right that the standard of living of the rich countries would seek to maintain itself by draining off a great part of the reserves of energy and raw materials that are meant to serve the whole of humanity.

Citizens of the United States, you have such a tradition of spiritual generosity, industry, simplicity and sacrifice that you cannot fail to heed this

call for a new enthusiasm and a fresh determination. It is in the joyful simplicity of a life inspired by the Gospel and the Gospel's spirit of fraternal sharing that you will find the best remedy for the temptation to make money the principal means and indeed the very measure of human advancement.

The 1988 encyclical, "*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*," focused upon issues of ecology and consumption. This statement emphasizes the seriousness of ecological problems which requires "the renouncing of personal selfishness" if "catastrophe for all is to be avoided."

Side by side with the miseries of underdevelopment..., we find ourselves up against a form of super-development.... [It] consists in an excessive availability of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, [and] easily makes people slaves of "possession" and immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better. This is the civilization of consumption, or "consumerism," which involves so much throwing away and waste.

All of us experience firsthand the sad effects of blind submission to pure consumerism: it represents crass materialism, and at the same time it represents a radical dissatisfaction because one quickly learns... that the more one possesses, the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.

If there is to be substantial solution of this predicament, it can only come about through repentance and embracing of the moral goodness to which Christ and the Church point us.

It is not out of place to speak of "structures of sin" which... are rooted in personal sin and... linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove.... One cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we name the root of the evils which afflict us.

The "structures of sin" ... can be overcome only through the exercise of the human and Christian solidarity to which the Church calls us and which she tirelessly promotes.

I wish to appeal with simplicity and humility to everyone, to all men and women without exception. I wish to ask them to be convinced of the seriousness of the present moment and of each one's individual responsibility....

In this [predicament], the sons and daughters of the Church must serve as examples and guides, for they are called upon, in conformity with the program announced by Jesus himself to "preach good news to the poor..., release to the captives... to set at liberty the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

For my own part, I wish to insist once more on the seriousness and urgency of this teaching, and I ask the Lord to give all Christians strength to put it faithfully into practice.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II chose the first day of the new decade as an opportune time to emphasize the importance of ecological issues in a "World Day of Peace" message.

The seriousness of ecological degradation lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of human life is lacking, we will also lose concern for others and for the earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as the spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life.

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past.

An adequate solution cannot be found merely in a better management or a more rationale use of the earth's resources, as important as these may be. Rather, we must go to the source of the problem and face... that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect.

Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. Among these is the "indiscriminate application" of advances in science and technology. Many

recent discoveries have brought undeniable benefits to humanity.... Unfortunately, it is now clear that the application of these discoveries in industry and agriculture have produced harmful longterm effects. This has led to the painful realization that we "cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention to the consequences of such interference... and to the wellbeing of future generations."

The most serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples.

The existing mechanisms and bodies are clearly not adequate for the development of a comprehensive plan of action. Political obstacles... and economic interests impede international cooperation and effective action. The right to a safe environment is ever more insistently presented today as a right that must be included in an updated Charter of Human Rights.

No plan or organization, however, will be able to affect the necessary changes unless world leaders are truly convinced of the need for this new solidarity, which is demanded of them by the ecological crisis and which is essential for peace.

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these attitudes cause. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.

The commitment of believers to a healthy environment stems directly from their belief in God as Creator, from their recognition of the effects of sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God (Psalm 148:96).

Environmental Voices addressing the role of Religion

Twenty years after Earth Day, those of us who set out to change the world are poised on the threshold of utter failure. Measured on virtually any scale, the world is in worse shape than it was twenty years ago. How could we have fought so hard, and won so many battles, now to find ourselves on the verge of losing the war?

**Dennis Hayes
Founder, Earth Day**

[To heal the earth] we must reinstate in our lives the ethic of love and respect for the Earth, which traditional peoples have retained as central to their value systems. This must be accompanied by a revitalization of the values common to all of the principle religious and philosophical traditions. Caring, sharing, co-operation with and love of each other must no longer be seen as pious ideals, divorced from reality, but rather as the indispensable basis for the new realities on which our survival and well-being must be premised.

**Maurice Strong
Secretary General for the U.N. Conf. on Environment and Development**

We cannot have peace on earth unless we make peace with the earth. This is going to require every sector of human society and it will particularly require what I think is the best organized sector of human society, the Church.

The Church has a requirement now to take the lead in replenishing the earth, and to see that all sectors of society replenish the earth, and replenish it again and again.

Unless we give as well as take when it comes to looking at our natural resources, humanity is not going to make it. The great opportunity for us now is to join in restoring the simple as well as the complicated things that will let us live in peace with the earth. ...

I see no institution in our civilization that can lead to this achievement more than the Church.

**David Brower,
A Call to the Churches**

The environmental movement for the past quarter of a century has made no more profound error than to misunderstand the mission of religion and the churches in preserving the creation....

We knew the nature of the challenge we faced, that it was moral: that the sin which tempts our leaders to despoil nature is pride, or hubris, and that the God whose worship seduces us to follow our leaders down that path is greed, or Mammon.

We knew the locus of America's moral instinct: We had seen that America's impulse to redeem and transform itself arose from the churches when they tackled the legacy of slavery and challenged the War in Vietnam.... We knew how hard it is to sustain morally driven organizations.

We acted as if we could save future generations, and yet unnamed and unknown species, without the engagement of the institutions through which we save ourselves. We rejected the churches. ... We became as narrow minded as fundamentalists of any religion.

I would like to close by acknowledging error. Environmentalists must engage with the churches and with faith. We have not. Indeed, if as White says, in the Eastern tradition intellectual blindness is sin, I stand here to confess that sin.

**Carl Pope,
The Sierra Club
An Apology to the Churches
November 6, 1997**