

**Is God Green? Emerging Environmentalism in the Evangelical Community**

By

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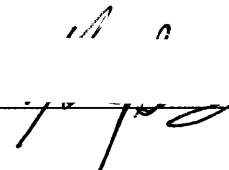
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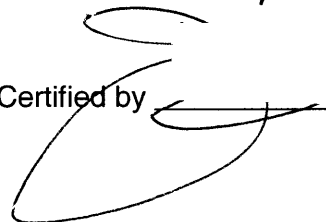
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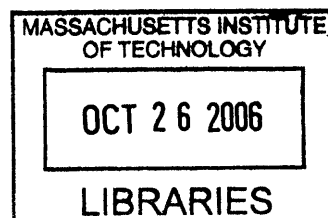
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## **Is God Green? Emerging Environmentalism in the Evangelical Community**

Marina Sophia Psaros

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### **Abstract**

In recent months, evangelical environmentalism has been the subject of much media coverage and debate. The central questions are whether evangelical environmentalists could be potential allies for the mainstream environmental movement, and what impact pro-environment evangelicals might have on politics.

I argue that evangelical environmentalists do not seek alliances with the mainstream environmental movement because the perception in the wider evangelical community is that environmentalism is liberal and un-Christian. This perception is the result of a confluence of theological, political, and cultural developments that have taken place over the past 30 years. As a result, the leaders of evangelical environmentalism do not want to risk forming coalitions with civic or political groups that would alienate members of their own political and religious communities. Instead, they work from within their own religious community to reframe environmentalism as a Christian duty, and they seek to change the Republican Party's stance towards environmentalism to align with their own.

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## INTRODUCTION

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*"I am a white, heterosexual, conservative Republican evangelical, and I am an environmentalist."*

Ted Haggard, *Christianity Today*, 2005

On February 8, 2006, a group of evangelical Christian leaders issued a statement called the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), urging business, government, and their own religious community to take actions to prevent global climate change. The seeming paradox of conservative Christians endorsing pro-environment policies intrigued the media and the event was covered widely. The event countered the conventional political wisdom that Republicans are the party of the faithful, that Democrats are the party of the environmentalists, and that the two don't mix. Many journalists and pundits on both side of the partisan fence wondered whether the ECI signaled a shift in the evangelical community towards a more "green" stance (Kuraitis, 2005); and speculated that environmentalists could count on a politically powerful new ally (Janofsky, 2005, Shields, 2005). In dozens of articles since the launch of the Evangelical Climate Initiative, journalists have pointed to the ECI as proof that conservatives are coming around to join the environmental movement.

On the surface, the Evangelical Climate Initiative does seem like a boon for the environmental movement and a potential source of headaches for the Republican Party. Interest group coalitions form and break based on individual groups' aims with respect to specific policy proposals, and examples abound of strange bedfellows coming together to achieve a common policy goal (Stone 2002, Cigler and Loomis 1998). Could the ECI be the start of a new alliance between traditionally opposed groups?

When I began this research by speaking with the leaders of evangelical environmentalism, I wanted to find out 1) how and on which issues they would be willing

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to form coalitions with mainstream environmental groups, and 2) whether evangelical environmentalism would have an impact on evangelicals' support for the Republican Party.

Contrary to my expectations (and to the conclusions that many observers had come to), I discovered that the evangelical environmentalists who had organized the Evangelical Climate Initiative are not interested in forming any coalitions with mainstream environmental groups at this time. In fact, they have intentionally avoided any association with mainstream environmentalism. Instead, they work from within their own religious community to reframe environmentalism as a Christian duty, and they seek to change the Republican Party's stance towards environmentalism to align with their own.

I argue that evangelical environmentalists do not seek alliances with the mainstream environmental movement because the perception in the wider evangelical community is that environmentalism is liberal and un-Christian. This perception is the result of a confluence of theological, political, and cultural developments that have taken place over the past 30 years. As a result, the leaders of evangelical environmentalism do not want to risk forming coalitions with civic or political groups that would alienate members of their own political and religious communities.

The emergence of ecotheology – that is, environmentalism grounded in religious beliefs - provided an opportunity for evangelicals to reframe environmentalism for their community. Evangelical environmentalists used the principles of ecotheology to develop an approach to environmentalism that they call “creation care.” The Evangelical Climate Initiative is the first concerted effort by evangelical environmentalists to apply this creation care framework to environmental policy. The ECI represents the culmination of several years' work on the part of evangelical environmentalists to legitimize their framing of environmentalism within the wider evangelical community.

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## **Definitions**

One reason observers have arrived at the wrong conclusions about evangelicals “joining” the mainstream environmental movement is simply due to confusion of terms. Words like “the Christian Right,” “conservative Republicans,” “the Religious Right,” “evangelical” and “fundamentalist” are often used interchangeably, by those who belong to one or more of the above categories, as well as by those who do not (Wilcox and Larson 2006, Kellstedt and Smidt 1996). These overlapping groups are commonly conflated into one undistinguished mass hovering over the right side of the political spectrum.

But this conflation is problematic because some of the above terms refer to religious belief systems while others describe a political stance. Although there is significant overlap between evangelicals, fundamentalists, and the Christian Right, the terms are not synonymous. “Evangelical” serves as a label for a broad socioreligious group sharing similar theological beliefs (Lenski 1963), and the term “Christian Right” refers to a political interest group that seeks to advance socially conservative policies (Wilcox and Larson 2006). A headline from a recent *Washington Post* article nicely illustrates the confusion between evangelicals and the Christian Right: “The Greening of Evangelicals: Christian Right Turns, Sometimes Warily, to Environmentalism” (Harden 2005). In fact, most of the leaders of the Christian Right movement are actively opposed to environmentalism, whereas evangelical theology has, until recently, largely ignored the environment.

Because the term “evangelical” often confounds the 75 percent of Americans who fall outside of the designation, I will define it here. At its most inclusive, the term “evangelical” simply refers to those who seek to spread the “good word” (Greek *evangelos*) of the Bible to others, and the term could therefore apply to any individual that believes in the teachings of the Bible. More commonly, the term is used to distinguish between theologically conservative (evangelical) faith traditions and theologically liberal

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(mainline) faith traditions of Protestant Christianity. Many denominations are considered “evangelical”, including most Methodists and Baptists, the Presbyterian Church in America, Assemblies of God, Churches of God in Christ, the majority of Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations, and most nondenominational mega-churches.<sup>1</sup>

What unites all of these denominations under the umbrella term “evangelical” are three beliefs that they hold in common: 1) that the Bible is the literally true word of God, 2) that individuals must be “born again” with Jesus Christ as their personal savior, and 3) that evangelicals who have been “saved” must attempt to save others by spreading “truth” of the Bible (Smidt 1988). This broad evangelical category contains a diverse spectrum of perspectives ranging from conservative fundamentalists who strive to distance themselves from secular society to more moderate evangelicals who see few problems with engaging in secular institutions and activities.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the core religious beliefs that they hold in common, evangelicals are increasingly identifiable by a few important political characteristics. The most well-known characteristic is that the majority of evangelicals now vote Republican. In the 2004 election, fully 78% of evangelicals voted for George W. Bush (Pew Research Center 2004). The Republican Party has become so secure of its evangelical support that leaders often refer to evangelicals as the “base” of the party. The other distinguishing feature of evangelicals that is relevant to this essay is that, as a group, they are the least environmentally-friendly bloc out of all of America’s major faith traditions. A number of scholarly studies have documented a link between holding theologically conservative

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that there are significant differences between black and white evangelical traditions. In the South, where most modern evangelical faith traditions originated, blacks were not allowed to worship at the same churches as whites. This historical separation has led the black churches to emphasize different aspects of Scripture and focus on different social issues than their white counterparts (Raboteau 1988). Because most of the individual and institutional actors involved in evangelical environmentalism are white, the focus of this paper is also on the white evangelical community.

<sup>2</sup> Fundamentalists comprise approximately 15 percent of the evangelical population, though an exact figure is difficult to determine because there is no strict dividing line between evangelicals and fundamentalists (Green, 2006)

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(particularly evangelical fundamentalist) beliefs and a lack of concern for environmental problems (Boyd 1999, Eckberg and Blocker 1996, Guth *et al* 1995, Greely 1993, Guth *et al* 1993). Polling data show that, out of the four major faith traditions in America (evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews), evangelicals are the least supportive of environmental protection policies and possess the lowest levels of awareness or concern for environmental problems (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2004).

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## **THE ORIGINS OF EVANGELICAL ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALISM**

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Studies linking religious affiliation and environmental attitudes do not exist for the 1960s and 1970s, so it is impossible to make the same kind of quantitative assessment showing low levels of support for environmental protection that the more recent studies cited above show for the past fifteen years. However, Larsen (2001) uses a qualitative study of evangelical periodicals, books, columns and editorials to argue that evangelicals were not initially opposed to environmentalism as it was framed at the beginning of the movement in the late 1960s.

During this early stage of the environmental movement, environmental problems were framed in terms of public health and safety. Blame was placed at the feet of big business, and solutions were presented in the form of “command and control” federal regulations on industry. Lawmakers responded to the outpouring of concern about environmental problems, particularly pollution, by creating the Environmental Protection Agency and passing the majority of the environmental legislation that is still in place today, including the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act and the Clean Air Act.

Aside from public health concerns, environmentalism did not have much staying power with the evangelical community. Scientific arguments did not resonate with evangelicals, given the widespread belief that many scientific principles undermined the authority of God by offering a heretical explanation for human existence. And, because there was no immediately-apparent link between God and the environment, the movement did not take firm root in this community that believes that the answer to all problems are found in Christ and the teachings of the Bible (DeWitt 2006). After the major pieces of environmental legislation were put in place in the early 1970s, the attention of the evangelicals – like the attention of the majority of Americans - drifted away from the environment (Larsen 2001).

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Evangelicals instead focused on the transformation that had been taking place within their own community since the post-WWII period. By the 1940s, many evangelicals wanted to distance themselves from the fundamentalist wing of their religious community. They disapproved of the rigid, anti-modernity, anti-science, and separatist stances of the fundamentalists (Smidt 1988). These “neo-evangelicals”, as they called themselves, wanted to evangelize their faith to others and believed that rejecting the intolerance and anti-intellectualism of the fundamentalists, while still adhering to classical Christian doctrine, would help them do so (Woodberry and Smith 1998, Smidt 1988).

During this same period, evangelicals as a group were becoming more educated, affluent, and geographically diffuse. The composition of the evangelical community changed from rural, poor, and Southern to suburban, middle-class, and dispersed throughout the country (Smith 2000). As this upwardly-mobile and educated generation rose to positions of leadership within the evangelical community in the 1970's, the direction of evangelicalism changed. New leaders like Billy Graham, Jimmy Carter, and Jerry Falwell encouraged evangelicals to focus their attention less on the rewards of the afterlife and more on what they needed to do in this life to earn those otherworldly rewards. That meant engaging in social and political institutions – activities that most evangelicals had avoided for the past several decades (Guth et al., 2006).

By the end of the 1970's, evangelicalism had transformed from a group of anti-intellectual separatists on the outskirts of wider American society to a community increasingly engaged in both political life and social activism. They turned out in record numbers in the 1980 election, leading Jerry Falwell to claim that the evangelicals had put Reagan in power (Wilcox and Larson 2006). Voting Republican was a surprising break from the Democratic Party that many evangelicals, particularly in the South, had supported for the previous century. They broke with voting tradition in the hopes that Reagan, himself an evangelical, would help them realize the goal of transforming society

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by guiding it back to Christian principles and saving it from moral collapse. The shift away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party is a trend that has repeated itself in almost every national election since 1980 (Wilcox and Larsen 2006).

### ***The Christian Right and the Environmental Backlash***

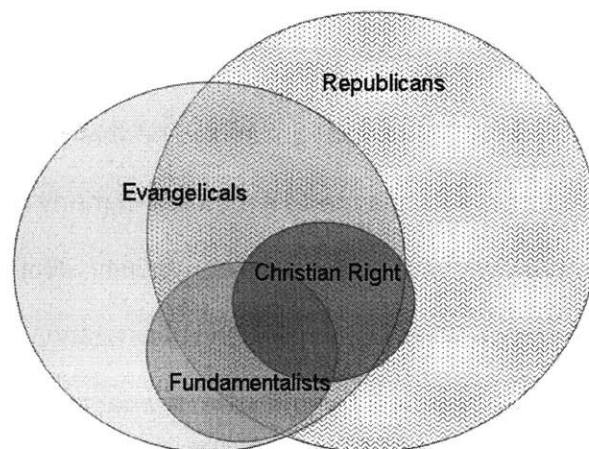
This shift had major consequences for politics and for the environmental movement. Newly politicized evangelicals found themselves in a coalition of Republicans that promised them action on their social agenda in return for votes and loyalty to the wider conservative agenda (Wilcox and Larsen, 2006). At the same time that evangelicals were gravitating towards the Republican Party, the environment was become a solidly Democratic issue. Although the Republican coalition was (and still remains) an often-tense mix of theological, fiscal, and foreign policy conservatives, one agenda item that many parts of the coalition could agree on was that they were opposed to the environmental movement. The anti-environment story that conservatives advanced had many angles: that environmentalists were liberal elites out to restrict individual rights, that they blew environmental risks out of proportion, that environmental protection policies were exorbitantly expensive (Layzer 2006), and that the environmental movement was a threat to Christian principles and had become a competing religion. The Christian Right was instrumental in getting this last message out to the evangelical community.

As evangelicals became more politically engaged, their power and visibility in the Republican Party increased. The Christian Right became the de facto mouthpiece for the evangelical community, pushing a core set of conservative agenda items. As with all broad coalitions, there are expectations about what each part of the coalition will give to the other. Republicans want the votes of evangelicals; Christian Right activists want Republicans to pass legislation in keeping with their social agenda. In order to bring the voters out, the Christian Right has consistently focused on a narrow set of issues salient

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with the evangelical community – incendiary “values” items like abortion, prayer in school, and gay marriage. Christian Right groups like the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, and the Traditional Values Coalition have been effective at mobilizing the Christian Right’s core constituency of white, socially and theologically conservative Protestants – many of whom are fundamentalist evangelicals - into political action through grassroots campaigns such as voter guide distribution in churches and local activism (Guth et al 1996). Although the names of individuals and organizations promoting a Christian Right agenda have changed over the years, the movement itself has matured and transformed to become “an influential interest group striving for the political mainstream” (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996).

**Figure 1: How Republicans, Evangelicals, and the Christian Right Overlap**



The above diagram depicts how Republicans, evangelicals, fundamentalists and the Christian Right overlap. Although the Christian Right receives widespread media attention and has been very successful in shaping public discourse on political and social issues that they care about, the movement does not enjoy the support of many outside its conservative evangelical base, and does not, in fact, have the support of the majority of

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evangelicals (Wilcox, DeBell, and Sigelman, 1999) or the majority of Republicans (Wilcox and Larson 2006). But although the Christian Right is small in numbers, it has been influential in shaping both the thoughts of evangelicals and the platform of the Republican Party. When conservatives began to attack the environmental movement in the 1980s, the Christian Right was contributed a unique story targeted to evangelicals.

In 1983, Reagan's Secretary of the Interior James Watt remarked at his confirmation hearing before the Senate "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns, whatever it is we have to manage with a skill to leave the resources needed for future generations." Environmentalists, who already disliked Watt intensely for what they perceived to be his anti-environment leanings, ridiculed his statement as supernatural fatalism. The media let out a collective titter in reports on the hearing. Another quote that was attributed to Watt, "after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back," added fuel to the fire.<sup>3</sup>

Watt responded to the negative press by claiming that he was being persecuted for his evangelical religion. The Christian Right seized on this idea of religious persecution from liberal forces, and has made it a theme in many debates since. The idea of persecution struck a chord with the evangelical community. Not only does it evoke certain images of perseverance and loyalty from Christian history; but, since the Scopes trial of the 1920s, evangelicals had been smarting from what they perceived as public humiliation and ridicule about their religious beliefs. They felt that they were often portrayed in the secular media as being stupid, crazy, or both (Emmerich 2006). Watts' claim of religious persecution therefore served as an important early link between religiosity and anti-environmentalism.

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<sup>3</sup> In a 2005 *Washington Post* article, Watt denies ever having made this comment. Whether he did or not, pro and anti-environmentalists have repeatedly referenced the alleged comment. Christian anti-environmentalists use it to support their claim that environmental protection is a futile endeavor because the earth will be destroyed in the Second Coming of Christ, and pro-environmentalists use it to argue that the Christian Right cloaks their anti-environmental political agenda in supernatural prophecies that have no place in the national policy arena.

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The Christian Right was able to build additional links by focusing on a few of the new philosophies and ideas that were gaining currency in the environmental movement. Conservatives published a number of anti-environment books and articles in the 1980s and 1990s that attacked environmentalism for being un-Christian. In *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and the Coming Age of Barbarism*, Constance Cumby argued that environmentalism was based on occultism and was an organized conspiracy to create a new world religion under the Antichrist (Cumby 1983).<sup>4</sup> Others argued that concern for the environment would lead people down the path to “ancient forms of nature worship” and paganism (Kjos 1992).

The anti-environmentalists focused their attacks on a few strains of environmental philosophy that were particularly repulsive to evangelicals. The Gaia hypothesis, popularized in a 1979 book by James Lovelock, proposed that the earth is alive and functions as a single organism. Subsequent iterations of the Gaia hypothesis took the idea of a Mother Earth and fused it with principles from the physical sciences. For many evangelicals, the Gaia hypothesis was a sinister combination of science in service to paganism. The belief that the earth is an ancient, female, living organism and the provider of life is a far cry from the belief that a male God created the world in seven days. Dean Ohlman, one of the proponents of evangelical environmentalism interviewed for this research, recalled an experience he had when looking for signs of anti-Christianity in the mainstream environmental movement:

I'd always been interested in the Sierra Club and was secretly a member during different periods in my youth. But in the 1980s, I picked up a book that [the Sierra Club] published called *Well Bodies, Well Earth*. As I was reading through it, my jaw just dropped. There was a lot of New Age spirituality in there without any reference to the Bible. The Sierra Club really shot themselves in the foot there. But thankfully they seem to have moved away from some of the more radical ideas they were putting out there.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on text in the Book of Revelations, many evangelicals believe that a unified world religion will be the sign that heralds the coming of the Antichrist and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

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Other philosophies like eco-feminism and deep ecology were also antithetical to evangelicals. Eco-feminism, in addition to seeming somewhat pagan, went against a number of Biblical commands that reinforced traditional gender roles including “*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife...wives should submit to their husbands in everything*” (Eph 5:22-23a, 24b) and “*The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man.*” (1 Cor 11:3)<sup>5</sup>

The deep ecologist view that humans are just one part of the ecosphere and that all life has intrinsic value runs counter to the belief that man was made in God’s image and is therefore distinct from, and superior to, other life forms. Even the ecological conception of time is problematic for evangelicals: ecology is based on cycles, time is circular, patterns are repeated, and life is regenerative. Evangelicals, however, believe that time is linear. And what happens at the end of that linear time (the “end times”) plays an important role in evangelical eschatology.

The “end times” eschatology is referred to as premillennial dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is the belief that God deals with man in a series of “dispensations”, or successive eras, and that the final dispensation will end with the destruction and recreation of the earth, followed by a 1,000 year kingdom of peace (Rev 20:4-20:6). Premillennialism holds that the kingdom of peace has not yet begun. Taken together, the common evangelical interpretation of the Book of Revelations is that, as a part of the final dispensation, an event called the Rapture will occur during which the faithful will be taken up to Heaven while the “unsaved” will be left behind to suffer the tribulations of the Antichrist. At the end of the tribulation period, God will battle the Antichrist and win, but the earth will be destroyed during the battle. It will then be renewed for the kingdom of

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<sup>5</sup> All Biblical citations used in this essay come from the King James Version of the Bible, which is the version used most commonly by evangelicals.

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peace. Some scholars have pointed to premillennial dispensationalism as one explanatory factor for evangelicals' lack of concern for environmental problems (Truesdale 1994, Curry-Roper 1990). After all, if the earth faces imminent destruction, then environmental protection is a waste of time and resources. When James Watt made his remarks before the Senate hearing, he was expressing this commonly-held evangelical belief about the end times.

Given the theological, political, and cultural divides between evangelicals and environmentalism, it is easy to understand why the leaders of evangelical environmentalism today want to steer clear of any association with the mainstream environmental movement. Many of the leaders interviewed for this research fear that association with the environmental movement will damage their credibility as good Christians. And without credibility, they will not be able to achieve their ultimate goal: to convince their fellow evangelicals that environmental problems are ones that Christians should care about. Moreover, they fear that supporting mainstream environmental positions will lead them to indirectly support other items on the liberal political agenda.

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## **DEVELOPING “CREATION CARE”**

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How, then, did any kind of evangelical environmental movement manage to germinate in such a hostile landscape of political allegiances, negative stories, and competing worldviews? The leaders of the evangelical environmental movement are a small group, many of whom are academics and identify with the “evangelical left,” as the political and socially liberal faction of evangelicalism is known. In several of the interviews conducted for this research, evangelical environmentalists told of personal “conversion experiences” during which the Holy Spirit helped them make the link between environmental protection and their Christian values. Once they had made that link, they sought to connect with like-minded individuals in order to refine their ideas and disseminate them to the rest of their community.

Rather than adopting the language and logic of mainstream environmentalism, evangelical environmentalists have developed a uniquely evangelical approach that builds on the basic concepts of ecotheology. They have fleshed out a theological framework for “creation care”, and then connected that framework to the evangelical social agenda. They enlisted the support of scientists to act as a bridge between faith and science and as a source of information that evangelicals could trust. Evangelical environmentalists have also made some inroads with the evangelical center in order to establish their cause as one that the mainstream Christian would care about.

### ***Contemporary Religious Environmentalism***

The origins of Christian faith-based environmentalism are often credited to a historian named Lynn White Jr. Against the backdrop of the emerging environmental movement of the 1960s, White published an enormously influential paper titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967). In his essay, White argued that western Judeo-Christian traditions held an anthropocentric worldview which led them to believe

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that it is “God’s will that man exploit nature”. He claimed that it was this worldview which led man to a sense of separation from, and dominion over, nature. White concluded that this “dominance” approach to the earth is ultimately responsible for modern environmental degradation.

White’s thesis was hotly contested by theologians of many denominational stripes. His argument prompted deep and sustained deliberation of environmental issues within a religious worldview among thought leaders in universities, seminaries, and the clergy. For evangelicals, that meant going back to their sole source of religious authority – the Bible - to look for evidence that environmental problems were not the result of an abusive Christian worldview. In reading it with that particular lens, some thinkers came to the conclusion that the Bible was clear about what man’s relationship to the earth should be. Francis Schaeffer, one of the most influential evangelical intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, argued in his *Pollution and the Death of Man; The Christian View of Ecology (1970)* that nature had intrinsic value because it was the creation of God, and that the Christian relationship to the environment should be one of stewardship (taking care of God’s creation), rather than dominion (the abuse of creation for man’s own ends). Thought leaders in other faith traditions were doing similar work to explore environmental ethics within their religious frameworks. For some other faith traditions, making these connections was easier than it was for evangelicals. These other traditions were able to draw on a wider range of sources than evangelicals could, and looked to the work of saints like Francis of Assisi, for example, and even secular humanist perspectives.

Thus, when a focusing event happened in 1990 that called attention to the link between religion and the environment, many faith traditions had developed a sufficiently thorough theological framework that enabled them to respond. The time was ripe for the flowering of religious environmentalism and for translating those theological frameworks into the policies and practices of denominations and congregations.

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## ***Responding to “An Open Letter”***

In 1990, a group of scientists that included 32 Nobel laureates published “An Open Letter to the Religious Community” in which they asserted that environmental problems should be approached from both scientific and religious angles. This appeal to the religious community was presented at the January 1990 Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders Conference in Moscow, Russia. In the document, scientists stated:

Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension... [We] urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth.

As with issues of peace, human rights and social justice, religious institutions can be a strong force here, too... The environmental crisis requires radical changes not only in public policy, but also in individual behavior. The historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example and leadership are able to influence personal conduct and commitment powerfully.

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for both religion and science

Faith communities responded to the call. The (mainline) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)<sup>6</sup> developed a policy called “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” (1990), which served as an early guiding document for their Environmental Justice Office. The (mainline) Episcopal Church established an Environmental Stewardship Team in 1991.

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<sup>6</sup> The Presbyterian Church splintered into two branches after the Civil War: one becoming mainline and the other evangelical. The evangelical branch is called the Presbyterian Church in America; the mainline is called the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

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The U.S. Catholic Bishops issued their first pastoral statement on the environment, “Renewing the Earth”, in November 1991. The (predominantly mainline) National Council of Churches created an office of environmental and economic justice in late 1991. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life published “On the Urgency of a Jewish Response to the Environmental Crisis” in May 1992. For many faith traditions, these activities were the first attempt in their histories to articulate official policies and statement papers affirming their commitment to environmental protection.

During this same two year period, a mainline Protestant church leader named Paul Gorman organized a series of ecumenical discussions with denominational leaders to explore forming a coalition that would represent the four major blocs of American faith traditions (Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, and Judaism), The purpose of this partnership was to create: 1) an information clearinghouse for environmental theology, 2) a venue for ecumenical conferences and activities, 3) a platform from which a religious “voice” could speak on environmental policy issues, and 4) a resource for congregational leaders to introduce religiously-based environmental stewardship to their laity.

Gorman contacted Ron Sider, the president of a progressive evangelical organization called Evangelicals for Social Action, in the hope that Sider “could bring some evangelicals to the table” (Sider, 2006). As discussions continued with strong interest and support from Jewish, mainline Protestant and Catholic national leaders and institutions, it became apparent that “no evangelical partner was emerging” (Sider, 2006).

The problem was rooted in the way that evangelicalism is structured. Evangelicalism in America has always been a grassroots, frontier-style arrangement of loosely-connected individuals and competing interpretations of the words in the Bible (Williams 2002). In contrast to most other major faith blocs in America, there is no national or para-church organization that claims to speak on behalf of all evangelicals, or

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has the authority to set church policy. The few influential organizations that exist in the evangelical community, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), have a long history of avoiding ecumenical cooperation and weren't interested in joining Gorman's coalition. Christian Right groups certainly weren't going to support the partnership, given that they had spent the past decade working hard to discredit environmentalism on both religious and political grounds.

Sider therefore agreed to create and host the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) under his own organization. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) was officially convened in October 1993, and consisted of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, The National Council of Churches of Christ, and the Evangelical Environmental Network. EEN was the only part of this partnership that did not have support from a major religious institution.

### ***The Evangelical Environmental Network***

According to Sider, EEN was a "hard sell" within the evangelical community for its first several years of operation (Sider, 2006). The lack of strong authoritative or institutional organizations within the evangelical community made it difficult to spread the idea of Biblically-based environmentalism. Where Catholic Bishops, for example, can issue pastoral letters and official policies that will govern the preaching and practices of their member churches, for example, there is no analogous authority for evangelicals. Biblical interpretation is done by a congregation's pastor who is not beholden to any authority aside from God, and whose interpretation of the Bible is legitimate as long as there is a congregation to listen to it.

To spread the word, EEN would have had to adopt an approach in which they talked to individual church leaders. If a church leader could be convinced of the creation

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care philosophy, then they would pass on the ideas to the laity. The impact of congregational leadership on the opinions of the laity has been documented – a few studies have shown that attitudes towards the environment are affected by the congregational culture and the sermon content of the pastor (Lieberman 2004, Guth and Kellstedt 1999). Allen Johnson, president of Christians for the Mountains and one of the founders of EEN explained: “With the evangelical community, you have to be grassroots, and you have to talk to individuals. You need to go to the pastor at each church, sit down together with the Bible in hand and talk about it. And sometimes those churches are small and hard to find. That is a lot of individual outreach to get your message out” (Johnson, 2006). EEN was too small to be able to do that kind of outreach effectively.

Not only was there no broad medium for the message, the message itself was suspect, given the widespread perception in the evangelical community that environmentalism was synonymous with New Age spirituality and secular liberalism. While many evangelicals were willing to engage politically and socially on behalf of “powerless” groups such as children and the poor, the idea that the environment was something that they should care about as Christians was still mainly restricted to a few intellectual elites (Sider, 2006).

Although membership lagged in the 1990’s, the evangelical environmentalists who were involved in EEN did four important things during this period: 1) they continued to refine and popularize a theological framework for environmentalism that would appeal to their religious community, 2) they connected the theological framework to social issues that evangelicals cared about, 3) they helped build a coalition of religious scientists that could be an authoritative and trusted source on scientific issues, and 4) they worked with well-established evangelical social and political organizations that would lend credibility to their cause.

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### *Refining and popularizing the theological framework*

The evangelical environmentalists built upon the theological work of Schaeffer and others, and reframed environmental protection in a very powerful way for their community. Starting with “chapter and verse” (as all sound evangelical reasoning must) they argued that, once God was finished with the creation of the world, he “saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good (Gen 1:31). God then “put [man] into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Gen 2:15). But the Bible also states several times that ‘The earth is the Lord’s” (Exod 9, PS 24, I Cor. 10:26) and does not belong to man. If God had created the world and everything in it, saw that it was good, and proclaimed that it was his and that man was supposed to take care of it, then harming God’s creation through pollution, waste, and species extinction must therefore be against God’s will. If harming the creation was against God’s will, then it was a sin. To stop sinning, the faithful needed to realign their relationship to the creation and learn to see themselves as stewards. Put in this frame, environmental protection becomes a non-negotiable Biblical mandate.

This is a very powerful frame for evangelicals, who strive to understand and obey God’s will. When we construct frames, we select particular normative “facts” and relations that then become the contents of the frame. The frames that we construct enable us to make the “normative leap from data to recommendations, from fact to values, from “is to “ought.” That is, the “facts” that we choose to apply to a problem already point to a particular solution (Schön and Rein 1994). When the “facts” chosen are that God created the world and created man to tend it, the solution is obvious: man must protect God’s creation.

This frame also reconciles end-times thinking and the prophecies of the Book of Revelations with environmental protection. With this frame, the “fact” that the earth will be destroyed after the imminent Rapture is no longer relevant to the relationship that

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evangelicals should have with the earth. If God chooses to destroy the earth, it is not for evangelicals to say either way, because no man can know God's plan. What matters in this frame is that Christians act as good disciples and adhere to God's expressed will.

Once they had developed this frame, evangelical environmentalists worked through EEN to disseminate it to their community. In EEN's quarterly publication, *Creation Care* magazine, evangelical environmentalists wrote about issues that would be salient with their audience; issues like the link between pollution and children's health (Landrigan, 1999) and energy consumption in churches (Rudin, 1998). Writers for *Creation Care* consciously employed words such as "stewardship" and "earthkeeping" instead of "environmentalism", and made frequent reference to a wide variety of Bible verses that supported environmental stewardship in the broadest sense. "We didn't want to ghetto-ize this to a few short verses in Genesis" explains Jim Ball, the executive director of the EEN, "we wanted to take the Bible as a whole and explain what the environment has to do with loving your neighbor and being a good disciple of Christ" (Ball, 2006).

In 1994, the EEN released "An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation". This statement laid out the logic for an evangelical environmental ethic in clear, easy language, and was a cornerstone of later efforts including the Evangelical Climate Initiative. It was signed by over 300 leaders, many of them leaders in Christian colleges or pastors of large congregations. The Declaration stated in part:

Because we worship and honor the Creator, we seek to cherish and care for the creation. Because we have sinned, we have failed in our stewardship of creation. Therefore we repent of the way we have polluted, distorted, or destroyed so much of the Creator's work

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 atmosphere; 7) human and cultural degradation...

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With continued population growth, these degradations will become more severe. Our responsibility is not only to bear and nurture children, but to nurture their home on earth. We respect the institution of marriage as the way God has given to insure thoughtful procreation of children and their nurture to the glory of God...

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that the Bible calls us to respond in four ways: First, God calls us to confess and repent of attitudes which devalue creation, and which twist or ignore biblical revelation to support our misuse of it ... Second, our actions and attitudes toward the earth need to proceed from the center of our faith, and be rooted in the fullness of God's revelation in Christ and the Scriptures ... Third, we seek carefully to learn all that the Bible tells us about the Creator, creation, and the human task ... Fourth, we seek to understand what creation reveals about God's divinity, sustaining presence, and everlasting power, and what creation teaches us of its God-given order and the principles by which it works.

*Connecting the theological framework to the evangelical social agenda*

The above excerpts from the *Declaration* illustrate how the drafters of the document took care to reference salient social issues such as heterosexual-only marriage, protection of children (and, by extension, fetuses), and the affirmation of the Bible as the authority that should guide society. When speaking about environmental values, EEN evoked concepts and vocabulary cherished by evangelicals about caring for the poor, being a faithful witness to Christ, and the importance of neighborly love. In doing so, they hoped to connect environmental issues to the core of the evangelical social agenda.

Since the 1970's, the evangelical community has slowly developed a biblically-based social agenda that, among other things, emphasizes following Jesus' teachings to help the poor, the weak, and the voiceless. Although the Christian Right has been successful in mobilizing evangelicals around the issues of abortion and gay marriage during election seasons, the list of issues that many evangelicals care about is much longer. In 1973, a landmark document called the *Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern* laid out an agenda for evangelicals and was one impetus for their return to

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the world of politics and social activism, after decades of separatism. Some of the largest evangelical relief organizations were founded or significantly expanded during the 1970s, including World Vision and World Relief. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority urged evangelicals to speak out against the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade*, which he saw as sanctioning the murder of unborn children. This agenda, focused on protecting the innocent, bringing God's word to the "unsaved", and advocating on behalf of powerless groups, has gained widespread acceptance in the community over the past few decades and is a source of pride for many evangelicals. By linking environmental protection to this agenda, EEN hoped to gain new converts to creation care.

#### *Enlisting the support of evangelical scientists*

During the early 1990's, Calvin DeWitt, a founding member of the EEN and a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and head of the Au Sable Institute, helped to assemble a group of evangelical scientists who were concerned about environmental problems. The purpose was to provide a "network for practitioners" (DeWitt, 2006), where academic scholarship rooted in evangelical faith could explore modern scientific issues. The Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists was meant to serve as a bridge between science and theology and, as DeWitt says "provide a source of reliable scientific information for people that would often suspect science" (2006).

Although most environmental conflicts are, at their root, conflicts between values and belief systems, environmental problems are rarely defined as such. Instead, conflicts are presented as disagreements about the meaning of scientific data, predictions of economic impacts, and levels of risk (Layzer 2006). The conflict over global climate change, for example, has been framed in terms of scientific uncertainty. DeWitt hoped

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that evangelical scientists would be able to bridge both the political and the religious divides and speak to the evangelical community from a place of authority on both levels.

During international climate negotiations at The Hague in 2000, the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists issued the *Statement of Concern on Climate Change and the Need for Clean Energy* in support of the scientific near-consensus that climate change was a problem demanding immediate action. The statement linked climate change to consequences that would be faced by the world's poor, and argued that, because Jesus taught to care for the poor, climate change was a Christian problem. The statement concluded that policies and actions encouraging energy efficiency was a necessary part of solving the problem for both religious and scientific reasons. EEN published the statement in *Creation Care* magazine and invited the scientists who had issued it to speak at events with religious leaders.

#### *Building relationships with the evangelical center*

The fourth strategy members of EEN used to get their environmental message out was to build relationships with influential moderate and progressive evangelical organizations. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Habitat for Humanity, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and World Vision are counted among their partners. Each of these organizations provided a potential audience for the evangelical environmentalists' message, and their support through affiliation lent EEN credibility as a solidly Christian endeavor. When the National Association of Evangelicals drafted their landmark 2004 policy statement *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*, EEN succeeded in including a section that outlined a broad agenda for biblically-based environmental protection:

We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part... Our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve

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and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it...We believe we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation.

But the real breakthrough for EEN and their message came in June 2004 with the Sandy Cove Covenant. EEN sponsored a two-day retreat for prominent evangelical leaders in Sandy Cove, Maryland, where attendees were invited to learn about creation care and discuss the implications of a biblical stewardship mandate. Among the attendees were the president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), Ted Haggard, and NAE government affairs liaison, Richard Cizik. NAE is a powerful organization in the evangelical community and in national politics, and claims to have a membership of 45,000 churches representing 30 million individuals (NAE 2006). Leaders of NAE meet frequently with lawmakers (particularly Republican lawmakers) who want to get the pulse of the evangelical community before making legislative decisions or endorsing potentially controversial policies. Both Haggard and Cizik had recently had conversion experiences to creation care, and attended the Sandy Cove meeting in order to discuss what sort of action they, as individuals and as representatives of NAE, should take (Cizik, 2006). At the conclusion of the Sandy Cove meeting, those in attendance signed a covenant which stated in part:

We covenant together to make creation-care a permanent dimension of our Christian discipleship and to deepen our theological and biblical understanding of the issues involved...

We covenant together to share our growing knowledge and concern about these issues with other members of our constituencies.

We invite our brothers and sisters in Christ 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, God's endangered creatures, and the important current debate about human-induced climate change. We covenant together to engage the evangelical community in a discussion about the question of climate change with the goal of reaching a consensus statement on the subject in twelve months.

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The final commitment in the covenant - to seek a consensus statement on climate change within one year - was the impetus for the 2006 Evangelical Climate Initiative. Those who had covenanted at Sandy Cove set out to persuade other evangelical opinion leaders that they had a responsibility to environmental protection, and began working on a draft of a climate change statement that would be acceptable to the widest possible evangelical audience. Finally, evangelical environmentalism had moved from the left fringe of evangelicalism to the center, and now had access to leaders that could spread their message from the pulpit to the classroom, and through NAE's political channels as well.

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## THE EVANGELICAL CLIMATE INITIATIVE

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Although it took more than twelve months and the final product was by no means a consensus within the evangelical community, *Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action* was finally released by the Evangelical Climate Initiative on February 8, 2006. The statement consists of four main points which echo the language and argumentation used in earlier statements by the evangelical environmentalists. First, the statement argues that human-induced climate change is real, and that the scientific data now exist to prove it. Second, the world's poor will be hit the hardest from environmental disasters resulting from climate change. Third, Christians have a moral duty to be good stewards of "God's Creation" and to protect and care for the world's poor. Fourth, immediate action is required from business, government, churches, and individuals in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

The statement was signed by 86 leaders whose names are widely known and respected in the evangelical community. Signatories included presidents of Christian colleges, leaders of mega-churches, members of NAE, editors at *Christianity Today*, and heads of Christian relief organizations (See Appendix I for list of signatories). Absent from the list are the members of the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists who had issued the *Statement of Concern on Climate Change and the Need for Clean Energy* at The Hague.

Calvin DeWitt explained that leaving out the scientists had been an intentional move. "We wanted to have new evangelical leaders sign, people who had never made a statement on climate change before. We didn't want this to be just about the science and the scientists, because that's where so much of the contentious debate had focused" (DeWitt 2006).

Although environmental conflicts often seem to arise from disputes about scientific or technical information, most of them "involve a fundamental disagreement over how

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human beings ought to interact with the natural world” (Layzer 2006). The evangelical environmentalists wanted to avoid the usual argument over technical information and get straight to their core message: that the environment is a moral issue that evangelicals should care about as Christians. One tactic of climate change naysayers has been to point out the “lack of scientific consensus” about climate change. Having scientists involved in the ECI – even if they were evangelical scientists - would have created an opportunity for detractors to reframe the issue in terms of scientific non-consensus.

The fact that it wasn’t “just about the science or the scientists”, but instead about big name conservatives signing on to a pro-environment statement, contributed to the wide media attention given to the ECI. Organizers of the statement held a press conference in Washington D.C. on February 8, 2006 that was covered in most of the national newspapers and made front page headlines in some, including the *New York Times* and the *Dallas News*. The story also made prime-time news that night on the NBC and CBS networks, as well as Fox and CNN. Over the next several weeks, more in-depth (and generally positive) coverage of evangelical environmentalism continued in publications as varied as *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Nature*.

This was exactly what the organizers of the Evangelical Climate Initiative had hoped for. The ECI had bought a full page ad in the New York Times, TV ad spots on CNN and Fox, and airtime on numerous Christian radio and television shows in states with high proportions of evangelical Christians including Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia. Of the ad in the New York Times, Ball (2006) said:

We took out the ad in the New York Times because that is the paper of record. We wanted the business community to take notice, we wanted the journalists to take notice, we wanted people in government to take notice, and we wanted opinion leaders to take notice. We wanted to signal that the Evangelical Climate Initiative was serious.

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Ball further noted that, though the TV ads were created for the evangelical community, the developers of the media campaign had kept the TV networks in mind during production. “I wasn’t worried that [the ECI] wouldn’t get media coverage, because those TV ads had some nice juicy visuals, they were a perfect package for the media. And we accomplished what we wanted. That media attention helps us with our ultimate mission: to educate the evangelical community and reach out to them as potential stewards of God’s Creation” (Ball, 2006).

### ***The Christian Right Response to the ECI***

Some powerful members of the Christian Right had also taken notice of the Evangelical Climate Initiative. On the same day as the ECI press conference, a group of 55 conservative evangelicals published a press release with the headline “*Vast Majority of Evangelicals Not Represented by ‘Evangelical Climate Initiative.’*” The tagline went on to claim “*NAE [and] ‘Who’s Who’ of Evangelical Leaders Do Not Endorse ECI Position*” (Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, 2006). But this press release was only the most recent in an ongoing effort from members of the Christian Right to undermine what the evangelical environmentalists had been trying to accomplish.

In late 2005, several prominent conservatives had gotten wind of the plan to create the Evangelical Climate Initiative, and had learned that NAE President Ted Haggard and NAE Vice President for Government Affairs Rich Cizik were involved. The conservatives quickly formed a group called the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (ISA). ISA was the resurrection of an earlier effort, the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship (ICES), which was organized in 2000 in response to NRPE, and more specifically EEN, activities.

At the time of their founding, the group produced the *Cornwall Declaration*, an anti-environment statement that argued that free market economics, technological innovation,

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and strong property rights were the solution to environmental problems (Larsen, 2001). Although the document was couched in the same type of religious language as EEN's *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation*, it offered very different policy solutions to environmental problems. The *Cornwall Declaration* was signed by influential members of the Christian Right such as Chuck Colson, who founded the Prison Fellowship Ministries after serving a prison sentence for his involvement in the Watergate scandal; Richard Land, president of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention and an advisor to Bush; James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family; and members of the Acton Institute, a conservative political think tank advocating private property rights, prayer in school, and global free-market economics. Having issued their *Cornwall Declaration*, the group more or less ceased activities until the threat of evangelical support for environmental protection policies reared its head with the ECI. "Basically, the ISA is the Christian equivalent of the Wise Use movement" says DeWitt (2006).

A week before the Evangelical Climate Initiative press conference, the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance gave the *Washington Post* a letter that they had written to NAE, urging NAE not to sign any statement about global climate change. The letter stated that

Global warming is not a consensus issue, and our love for the Creator and respect for His creation does not require us to take a position...We are evangelicals and we care about God's creation. However, we believe that there should be room for Bible-believing evangelicals to disagree about the cause, severity and solutions to the global warming issue.

Further, we signatories who are members of NAE believe that if the NAE wishes to take an official position on global warming or any other issue, it should do so through its formal process within the general council. Individual NAE members or staff should not give the impression that they are speaking on behalf of the entire membership.

The *Washington Post* reported on February 2, 2006, that NAE would not sign a position statement about global warming due to a lack of consensus amongst its

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onstituents.<sup>7</sup> What the *Washington Post* missed, according to Cizik, is that there had never been a plan for NAE as an organization to sign a policy statement, but that individual members were free to get involved with the ECI. Most of those individuals that I interviewed believe that ISA intentionally “leaked” the letter to the *Washington Post* in the hopes of generating publicity for themselves and their alternative take on creation care. And, since they were urging NAE to refrain from doing something that NAE wasn’t planning on doing anyway – taking an official stand on the Evangelical Climate Initiative – their letter would make it seem as if resistance from a large part of the community had been the reason that NAE didn’t sign. “It was cleverly done”, said one ECI supporter.

In the *Washington Post* and other articles, the media picked up on the idea of a rift in the supposedly monolithic evangelical community. What the mainstream media got wrong was the assumption that the ECI was *causing* that rift. In a personal interview, an exasperated Cizik explained:

The climate initiative is not causing a rift in the evangelical community. People will choose their issues according to their intellectuality, faith, and practice. Enough diversity exists within the evangelical community that all of our important issues can be covered. The evangelical community was diverse to begin with. Family-related organizations aren’t going to get involved in creation care. They’re not devoted to those issues, so God bless them and let them work on their issues. All of these issues are each in their own way a calling.

As Lyndsey Moseley, an evangelical and an employee at the Sierra Club said “What a lot of people don’t realize is that this supposed “rift” was there long before the Evangelical Climate Initiative. There’s this view that all evangelicals are members of the Christian Right, but that’s just not true. I think that the majority of people are probably

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<sup>7</sup> Many of those who signed the letter to NAE are not actually members of the organization, a fact that led several of the evangelical environmentalists to the conclusion that the letter was politically motivated.

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somewhere between Jim Wallis<sup>8</sup> and Jerry Falwell. These people in the middle are just waiting for some leadership to represent them” (Moseley 2006).

Over the next several weeks, leaders of the Christian Right attempted to wrest attention back their core issues and insinuate that the ECI signatories were abandoning the core of the evangelical agenda. In a Focus on the Family newsletter, James Dobson said that the EEN and the ECI were funded by “abortionists” (in reference to a grant given to the EEN by the Pew Charitable Trusts). Chuck Colson wrote in his *Town Hall* column that the signatories were off track and shouldn’t advocate positions that might cause a financial burden to the poor by raising the cost of fuel (Colson 2006). The following quote by conservative commentator Brett Howse sums up the sentiments of the Christian Right response:

Did you hear the news? Eighty-five [*sic*] “evangelical” leaders have come together and formed a coalition to bring attention to an issue. Is it abortion, same-sex marriage, training Christians in Biblical evangelism or calling churches back to the Bible? No! Sad to say, this group of 85 “evangelical” leaders has not organized to confront any of these serious issues facing America or the church but to save us from burning up due to global warming. As if this is not bad enough, the initiative of these Christian leaders is being funded by pro-abortion, pro-same-sex marriage, globalist foundations.

Many in the group of 85 are pastors and Christian leaders who would rarely, if ever, take a stand publicly on moral issues, like abortion and homosexuality. However, now they are leading a crusade that is making national headlines on what is not only a “political” issue but an issue adored by members of the secular left like former Vice-President Al Gore and Hollywood’s wackiest.

But what evangelical environmentalists paid attention to in the response was the fact that none of the ECI critics attacked the principle of creation care as a biblical mandate. The frame that “protecting the creation” is a Christian duty was affirmed explicitly by many of the ECI critics. ECI critics chose instead to take issue with the policy

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Wallis is liberal evangelical pastor and the founder of *Sojourners*. He has become popular on the talk show circuit for his book “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It” in which he criticizes the Christian Right and the Republican Party for supporting policies that he believes are not in line with the evangelical social agenda.

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options proposed by the ECI. Supporters of the ECI claim that this acceptance of creation care as biblical mandate is itself a sign of victory and that, once “people really start thinking and talking about creation care, they will come to the same conclusions we did.” (Ball 2006).

That is a very hopeful conclusion. But is the Christian Right’s use of “creation care” language an indication that they are changing their thinking towards environmental issues, or are they simply co-opting the evangelical environmentalists’ language and frame in order to change the meaning? Here, it might be useful to briefly discuss two different levels of frames: rhetorical frames, and action frames. Rhetorical frames broadly define what symbols and justifications will be used in creating a “policy story.” Action frames are used “to construct the problem of a specific policy situation” (Schön 1994). By affirming “creation care” as a biblical mandate, the Christian Right has accepted the rhetorical frame of the evangelical environmentalists. However, by arguing that enacting policies to protect against climate change will “hurt the world’s poor the most” (ISA 2006), they reject the policy action frame put forth by the ECI and offer an alternative policy action frame that is also compelling to evangelicals – that the world’s poor need protection from economic injustice. A vague commitment to “protect the creation” is something that all evangelicals might be able to agree on, but a call to legislate a cap on greenhouse gas emissions is in conflict with the typical Republican approach to environmental policy.

Between these two frames lies no small measure of politics. As discussed earlier in this essay, many in the Christian Right movement have embraced the full gamut of conservatism – social, theological, economic, and foreign policy. But rejecting “creation care” outright would make them lose as much credibility with centrist evangelicals as would evangelical environmentalists joining Greenpeace. The creation care frame is simply too powerful. Navigating the new world of evangelical environmental responsibilities is a difficult prospect for all sides.

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### ***Confusion in the Evangelical Center***

NAE's stance illustrates just how difficult it is to navigate this new territory. Because NAE is at once a political lobbying organization and a para-church ministry, members are keyed in to the necessity of appealing to as many groups in their coalition as possible. Their messages are often unclear and in conflict with each other, showing that they do not yet have a comprehensive position on the environment. NAE leaders are experimenting with the idea of a "third way" for evangelicals to approach environmentalism. "We aren't playing a zero-sum game any more, like the Moral Majority did. We want to be bipartisan, inclusive, and Biblical" (Cizik 2006).

In an *L. A. Times* interview in 2005, Ted Haggard said "the environment is a values issue. There are significant and compelling reasons why it should be a banner issue for the Christian Right...We think that our approach is a pro-business, pro-free market approach to environmental problems." But Haggard has also said that government must play a role in protecting the environment (2005). If "pro-free market" raises the hackles of mainstream environmentalists, the NAE position that government has a necessary role to play in ensuring environmental protection raises the hackles of the Right.

Haggard has said that NAE wants "God-only" solutions, and that "we are so diametrically opposed to some of the traditional environmentalist philosophies that we don't return [mainstream environmentalists] phone calls, because we think this should be an evangelical Christian issue" (Haggard 2005). Many of the evangelical environmentalists want to use their current political clout to compel the GOP to support more pro-environment policies. Rich Cizik says "If anyone doubts our capacity to change policy, they misunderstand our resolve. We've settled for access without influence before, but that is changing as people start to see how much power we have. If we could get evangelicals to rally behind environmental protection like they have behind abortion, we could really cause an impact" (Cizik 2006).

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This is why many evangelical environmentalists feel the need to “join together as evangelicals first” (Emmerich 2006) before partnering with or supporting any mainstream environmental group. Richard Cizik acknowledges that “we have a lot of work to do in our own community” and believes that evangelical environmentalists need to avoid both mainstream environmental groups and political religious groups until they have developed a more sophisticated and comprehensive message. “We need to distribute some Bible study materials so that people can go back to the Scriptures and examine the foundational proof of creation care for themselves. We’ve done a number of focus groups that show that most evangelicals haven’t really given the environment much thought. We need to change that” (Cizik 2006).

Gaining the support of individuals who have low levels of awareness or are undecided on environmental issues is what environmental politics consists of today (Layzer 2006). And, because many evangelicals have relatively low levels of environmental awareness and have not considered environmental ethics in terms of their religious beliefs, evangelical environmentalists have an opportunity to get their message out to a new group that could potentially be influential in environmental politics. This may explain why the Christian Right has chosen to engage in environmental debate the way that they have, instead of ignoring it altogether in the hope that it would go away if left unaddressed. “What you see with the ECI is just the opening salvo” says John Green, evangelical scholar at Acton University. “Next will come the trench warfare” (2006).

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## CONCLUSIONS

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Is the time ripe for a “greening” of the evangelical community, as so many observers have concluded? A uniquely evangelical theological framework now exists that roots environmental stewardship, broadly defined, in terms of sin and Christian responsibility. Evangelical environmental activists have linked that theological framework to a few environmental issues using the evangelical social agenda as a bridge. They now have a banner issue – climate change – that has received support from a number of well-respected members of their faith community. Evangelicals as a whole are now comfortable in the public sphere and are committed to social and political engagement, which is a prerequisite of environmental activism.

But evangelical environmentalists face continued opposition to their efforts from the Christian Right, and must also combat persistent mistrust of the environmental movement. Before evangelical environmentalists feel that they would be ready to cooperate with members of the mainstream environmental movement, they believe that they first need to persuade their fellow evangelicals that environmental stewardship – as they have framed it - is a biblical mandate for all Christians. The Christian Right may be correct in saying that the Evangelical Climate Initiative does not represent the majority of evangelicals, but the Christian Right doesn’t speak for the majority either. It remains to be seen who, between the evangelical environmentalists and the Christian Right, will be able to frame exactly what “creation care” should mean in terms of environmental policy and individual responsibility.

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## **DISCUSSION: THE FUTURE OF EVANGELICALS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM**

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Evangelical environmentalists are currently more concerned with evangelizing to their own community than they are with reaching out to non-evangelical environmentalists. They take this approach so that evangelicals can do “God’s work in the world” without being “misled” by secular forces (Cizik 2006). Once a sufficient number of evangelical environmentalists exists, with the vocal support of a wide cross-section of evangelical thought leaders, some evangelical environmentalists have said that they may then be willing to consider cooperating with other groups on environmental issues. But they will only do so in situations where they clearly see the biblical basis for action. “We don’t want to be ‘me too’ environmentalists” explained Richard Cizik (2006). Evangelical environmentalists are very clear about the fact that they are “Christians first, environmentalists second. Faith drives the environmental issues” (Moseley 2006).

Mainstream environmentalists have not expressed the same kind of reservations toward cooperation that evangelicals have. This is perhaps because the mainstream environmental movement is a more mature movement, and mature social movements tend to be less ideological and accept compromises in order to achieve broad goals. After the ECI was released, many of the major environmental groups praised the effort, and many have tried in the past few years to reach out to evangelical leaders. But the way that evangelical environmentalists have framed some issues might present a problem for those mainstream environmentalists who hold politically progressive views. Consider, for example, the way that the Evangelical Environmental Network has framed the issue of mercury poisoning (2004):

Christians are called by our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, to love our neighbors and do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We are also called to protect our most vulnerable populations, including unborn children. Since 1971 the NAE has proclaimed that all life is a gift of God, and that God Himself in Scripture has conferred divine blessing upon unborn infants and desires their protection. Many

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Christians are unaware of an important threat to the unborn child that must be addressed: mercury pollution.

To protect all unborn children from mercury we must significantly reduce the amount of mercury pollution we create as a society. The largest contributor is coal-burning power plants. Currently mercury pollution from coal-burning power plants is not regulated. This must change! There are several Clean Air bills before Congress that include the regulation of mercury. The strongest on mercury is the Clean Power Act by Senator Jeffords (I-VT). The weakest is the Clear Skies Act of Sen. Inhofe (R-OK). In the middle is the Clean Air Planning Act by Senators Carper (D-DE) and Alexander (R-TN).

Reframing mercury pollution – an issue long salient with mainstream environmentalists – in terms of protecting unborn children may be a way to make the topic more salient with evangelicals, but it should surely give some secular environmentalists pause. “Protecting the rights of unborn children” is precisely the language used by the Christian Right when arguing for a ban on abortion. By supporting evangelicals in their argument that ending mercury pollution protects unborn children, mainstream environmentalists tacitly support the belief that fetuses are unborn children with “rights” that need protecting. Is that a position that pro-choice environmentalists want to endorse? Concerns about agenda capture have been raised repeatedly by evangelicals interviewed for this research. But agenda capture can go both ways.

Because so many of the environmental problems we face today are due to the lifestyle choices of individuals (where we live, what kind of cars we drive, how we use energy and consumer products), a widespread environmental ethic rooted in personal responsibility and core values could go a long way to alleviating those problems. That is, if politics do not interfere.

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