Evangelicals are Conservationists

In "Armageddon versus Extinction," David Orr (2005) presents a less-than-flattering picture of evangelical Christians and their influence on conservation-related policy. I do not deny that some of the troubling dynamics he describes are at work, but I do challenge his basic diagnosis—that the apocalyptic tendencies of evangelical theology make believers complacent and thus complicit to environmental degradation. By presenting evidence that environmental complacency is not the trend in evangelical thought and by giving some reasons, contra Orr, why we should not expect it to be, I submit that evangelical influence on the Republican Party is ultimately a cause for hope to conservationists. Who else stands in a position to prick the environmental conscience of the right?

Evangelicals are a loosely defined group. Is there any way to ascertain, with any kind of rigor, a representative evangelical position on environmental conservation? If there is an organization that can be taken to represent evangelical Christianity, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) is a viable candidate. The NAE has been active since 1942 and represents some 52 denominations and numerous individuals and parachurch organizations. Last fall the NAE produced a document entitled "For the Health of the Nation: an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" (www.nae.net). The document is a succinct statement of evangelical policy position and a justification for evangelical political engagement. It was passed unanimously by the association’s board of directors (42 to 0) and has since gathered the signatures of more than 100 evangelical leaders. Although written by committee, one of the primary drafters is the editor of Christianity Today, arguably the most prominent and well-respected evangelical publication. If one modern document can be taken to represent, with any kind of authority, the evangelical position on matters of public policy, I know of no better candidate than this one.

So what does this document say about conservation? The following are a few significant excerpts from the section called "We Labor to Protect God’s Creation."

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. . . . This implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it [emphasis added].

Sustainability and humanity as part of nature—these are defining tenets of green political thought. A few lines down one reads, "We believe that we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation." Although the value of nature expressed here may not be technically intrinsic, it is independent of human value and therefore functionally equivalent.

Because natural systems are extremely complex, human actions can have unexpected side effects. We must therefore approach our stewardship of creation with humility and caution.

Here is both the precautionary principle and the traditional environmental critique of human hubris.

We urge Christians to shape their personal lives in creation-friendly ways: practicing effective recycling, conserving resources, and experiencing the joy of contact with nature. We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats.

Prominent evangelical leaders have apparently embraced the green agenda in its entirety. Witness also the 10 March New York Times headline: "Evangelical Leaders Swing Influence behind Effort to Combat Global Warming." Add to this the rise of organizations such as the Evangelical Environmental Network (whose own statements have gathered impressive collections of signatures of evangelical leaders), and a picture of evangelicals begins to emerge that stands in stark contrast to Professor Orr’s caricature of a “foolish and dangerous group” who are “careless stewards” and who threaten “to undo civilization entirely.”

So what is wrong with Orr’s logic? Well, as must also be understood by most conservationists, expectation of catalytic events does not undermine the present value of creation. Yes, it is possible to find those who think it does, who in light of such visions, simply say, why bother? But such people are to be found in both camps, and the view stays surprisingly on the margins. Orr suggests that being both an evangelical
and a conservation biologist requires "heroic intellectual acrobatics." The real acrobatics, however, seem to come in justifying how one can be an evangelical and not a conservationist—how is one to coherently yearn for the redemption and restoration of creation while treating it as worthless? How is one to sing on Sunday about the glory of God reflected in forest glade and lofty mountain grandeur and then turn around and be indifferent to the deforestation of the tropics?

David Orr exhorts evangelicals to take more seriously the rest of scripture and its mandates to care for creation. If anyone takes scripture seriously, it's the evangelicals, including the parts on caring for the Earth.

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