A Response

I appreciate the many responses, pro and con, to “Armageddon Versus Extinction,” and particularly the spirit of “constructive engagement” suggested by Simon Stuart et al. There are points that require clarification, points of agreement that require little or no comment, and a few points of disagreement that are significant.

First, to clarify the discussion, the target in my article is “increasingly militant fundamentalist Christians,” “conservative evangelicals,” and “[politically] organized conservative Christians,” the same group that liberal evangelist Jim Wallis says is “trying to transform the church into the religious arm of conservative Republicans” … and thereby “hijack faith and politics” (Wallis 2005). I explicitly did not target all Christians, all evangelicals, or “an entire religious community” as Professor Van Dyke asserts. I happen to be a member of a fairly evangelical church and grew up as the son of a conservative Presbyterian minister. Unfortunately, the militant right wing of the faith has become the political “base” of the most destructive U.S. administration in memory, one that is contemptuous of science, environmental protection, international law, and world opinion, and much enamored of secrecy and military power. There are, as David Johns usefully notes, different versions of Christianity, and evangelicals have often been involved in conservation to good effect as Professor Van Dyke says. Agreed. And neither did I say that being an evangelical requires one to be conservative. I explicitly stated the contrary view.

Second, we agree that, relative to planetary environmental challenges, the Christian faith has been an underachiever—“sluggish” as Stuart et al. put it. The same could be said of other faiths and other institutions, including those of higher education. What makes this sluggishness particularly salient, however, is the close historical connection of Christianity and capitalism, and the recent tendency for right-wing churches to support the powers involved in the global economy currently running roughshod over people, ecologies, and the prospects of future generations. In a larger perspective there is the paradox noted by Bill McKibben that “America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior” (McKibben 2005).

Third, in response to my comment that conservation biologists might aim “to develop a coherent and plausible alternative story of our ecological maladjustments,” Stuart et al. sermonize about what science can and cannot do. I did not propose to replace religion with science or disparage religion, as they allege. I intended to disparage inappropriate political uses of religion that violate the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution and justify indifference to ecological and human ruin. What I propose is rather like what E. O. Wilson has done for the subject of biological diversity, Carl Safina has done for marine science, Rachel Carson did for chemical pollution, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have done for cosmology, and several of the cosigners of Stuart et al. have done as well, which is to say present science in its larger context in that mixing zone where fact and mystery meet. To the extent that conservation scientists lack a larger story they leave the field open to charlatans who will fill the human need for meaning with snake oil of one kind or another.

Fourth, Stuart et al. say they are most disturbed by my call “for confrontation rather than dialog with evangelicals.” But I did no such thing. What I did was to ruminate a bit on the costs and benefits of various strategies without settling on any one in particular. Lacking a strategy, I suggest only that we tell the truth in as compelling a way as possible.

There is a deeper issue, however. Stuart et al. are afraid, I think, of being impolite, of giving offense. But what particular style of Christian discourse would they propose? Would it be that of Moses who shattered the Ten Commandments at the feet of the backsliding Israelites? Or that of the Old Testament prophets who called wayward people to task with unsparing honesty? Or that of Jesus? How was it that he proposed to “dialog constructively” with money changers in the temple? Or would it be that of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg? Or would it be that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who railed against “cheap grace” and willingly died as a witness? Or is it the style of Martin Luther King Jr. who spared no words to describe the connection between racism and the war in Vietnam?
Or that of theologian and lawyer William Stringfellow, who identified the United States 30 years ago as the heir to “the ethos and mentality of Nazism” (Stringfellow 1973).

Said differently, at what point in the 1930s did the politeness of the German Church become the obsequiousness and then the full-blown cowardice that Pastor Niemöller later lamented? I do not know. But I do wish to inquire of Stuart and his cosigners how they intend to confront the alliance formed between right-wing evangelicals and what theologian Walter Wink identifies as the “Powers”—the vendors of war, weapons, torture, corporate power, wealth, injustice, and ecological ruin (Wink 1984, 1986, 1992). What is at stake now—the death of the ecological conditions that permitted humankind to flourish—calls for a level of honesty, unprecedented directness, and wisdom that can shift the perceptions, loyalties, and behavior of an entire culture. Yes, constructive dialog if you can have it, but truth as clearly as you can see it and as unequivocally as you can say it.

Fifth, although Van Dyke’s listing of the 40 Christian organizations engaged in conservation and the 36 of 105 evangelical schools that “offer majors or program concentrations in environmental or conservation studies” is useful, his take-no-prisoners defense of evangelicals is less so. He writes as if he is defending evangelicals generally, which confuses things greatly. Again, for clarity, I did not say that “evangelical influence in conservation policy is entirely negative,” nor did I impugn an entire religious community as he says. My target was, and remains, conservative evangelicals much enthralled by the prospect of an end time, rapture, Armageddon, and the establishment of a theocracy along the lines proposed by U.S. Congressman Tom DeLay. Much of the purported biblical justification underlying such views is distorted or fraudulent (Bawer 1997; Rossing 2004). And, yes, I am aware of the “growing body of theological and ethical literature on environmental stewardship produced by evangelical scholars, dating from the 1970s” and have even read some it. But I am also aware that Pastor Tim LaHaye’s 12-volume Left Behind series has reportedly sold more than 50 million copies and exerts a considerable and pernicious influence on right-wing evangelicals and their politics. There is a lot of religious nuttiness loose in the land that Professor Van Dyke apparently does not see. And, yes, I do believe conservative evangelicals are “complicit” in “eviscerating environmental statutes, treaties, and policies,” as Van Dyke says. Although I did not put it quite that bluntly, I will accept his wording.

Finally, it is one thing to boldly exercise oneself to joust with me, living humbly at the outer margin of respectability and influence in the pages of a scientific journal with relatively few readers and limited public visibility. It would be quite another to engage as energetically with, say, Jerry Falwell and his followers, or Pat Robertson and his, or the millions of subscribers to James Dobson’s network, or Rick Scarborough, or all those within the Christian Coalition, or the Southern Baptist Convention, or James Kennedy and the Dominionists who intend a right-wing evangelical takeover of the U.S. government “whatever the cost” (Moser 2005). Or those further out still, the rabid followers of the end times, and all those merchants of fear and divine vengeance frothing on “Christian” radio across the heartland. And, if unknownst to me, that dialog has begun, let me inquire in the spirit of constructive Christian engagement, how is it going? Are you making headway? Are they listening?

But whatever our differences and whatever difference these discussions make, we are joined in the recognition that life is in jeopardy and in the belief that authentic religion ought to be a considerable help, not an obstacle, in reversing that condition.

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Literature Cited


