

The World House: Prophetic Protestantism and the Struggle for Environmental Justice

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Though much has been rightly made of the destruction wrought by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April, 2010, it pales in comparison to the ongoing damage done to the environment by our unsustainable way of life. Global instability exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2008 to the present has compounded increasing ecological vulnerabilities, including the most basic needs of food and water among the world's poorest. Because of these combined crises, it is vital that people of faith develop methods of collaboration that support and enrich each others' efforts towards sustainability sooner rather than later.

Given the extent and magnitude of our economic and environmental problems, it is time for evangelicals and liberal Protestants to work together for the ecological good. Protestantism has been a religious movement for great good, but also the source of deep divisions. Born through a division with the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism, in its engagement with modernity, forced a further division into evangelical and liberal communities. Now the urgent need to preserve and regenerate the global environment offers an ideal opportunity to work towards the repair of these older theological divisions through joining together in the common task of environment justice. In seeking to repair the earth as a common ethical task, Protestants can also enact an ecumenical vocation to heal the divisions within the broader world Christian movement.

The environmental justice movement provides a theological horizon that can unite liberals and evangelicals in a collective struggle for the ecological good. After analyzing the problem of cultural insularity that remains an obstacle to liberal-evangelical collaboration, I analyze their distinct theological strategies for solving environmental problems. While liberals have pursued a sustainable community strategy, evangelicals have pursued a creation care strategy, yet both are plagued by the spectre of white supremacy. In the final section, I argue that the environmental justice movement has been the most significant Christian contribution to American environmental thought and provides a new horizon for the prophetic Protestant movement for love and justice. Starting with the subject position of poor communities of color, the environmental justice movement points a way ahead for liberals, evangelicals and the entire human community to live together in peace in the "world house."

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL INSULARITY

Cultural insularity has been one of the primary obstacles to liberal and evangelical communities' joining together in collaborative environmental activism. Although liberal and evangelical Christianities share a common belief in the good

creation, they forged distinct theological paths in North America. Evangelicals and liberals responded to modernity in fundamentally different ways, producing what Martin Marty has called “two-party” Christianity.¹ Marty identified the liberal-evangelical binary as a heuristic device to help narrate the history of American Christianity. This perspective does unveil some of the distinctive differences between these two religious cultures; however, it does not emphasize their common past and the possibility of deeper future collaboration.

The culture wars in the United States drove evangelical and liberal Christians into two largely distinct religious cultures with their own networks of seminaries, colleges, churches and advocacy groups. Because of this historic separation and their theological differences, the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals programs have functioned separately with different objectives and styles. Liberal environmental activists have sought to work ecumenically, while evangelicals have preferred a more entrepreneurial style of activism. While helpfully highlighting the distinctiveness of these different religious cultures, the “two-party” thesis of American religion is blind to the deeper convergences within these traditions and their social practices.² By taking a careful look at the history of the liberal and evangelical environmental movements, we observe that they not only have distinct theological strategies, but also have common practices and common blind spots.

THE LIBERAL SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

In 1961 Joseph Sittler woke up the ecumenical world. At the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches, he called the ecumenical movement to “the care of the earth, the realm of nature as a theater of grace, the ordering of the thick, material procedures that make available to or deprive man of bread and peace.”³ Appealing to Calvin’s metaphor of creation as a “theater of grace,” Sittler argued persuasively that it was time for a theology of the earth that included a vigorous environmental ethic.

Sittler’s prophetic call was heeded, but in the framework of an ethics of responsibility. Environmental problems became another “responsibility” that humans were to manage in tandem with other ethical concerns. The trope of “responsibility for society” which had dominated mid-twentieth century Christian ethics was expanded to taking “responsibility for the earth.”⁴ This new focus on

1 For Marty’s development of the “two-party thesis” see *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 177-187. I would like to thank Dr. Paul Martin and Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos for inviting me to present this paper at the Columbia University Seminar on Religion and World Community in February 2009. Critical questions raised by Holly Hillgardner, Willis Jenkins, Michael Kinnamon, Lawrence Troster, and Joe Strife helped strengthen this article.

2 Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. argue, “the two-party model provides an inadequate map of American Protestantism, 1900-present, while at the same time distorting Protestant hopes for the future.” Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., “Introduction,” *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1; cf. idem. “Historiography of American Protestantism: The Two-Party Paradigm, and Beyond,” *Fides et Historia* 25 (Fall 1993): 4-15.

3 Joseph Sittler, “Called to Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 14/2 (January 1962): 186.

4 The Niebuhr brothers played an important role in the development of the ethics of

cares for the earth marked the beginning of an “ecological turn” in liberal Christian ethics that grew out of these global ecumenical discussions.

“A theology of revolution” was the call of theologians from the global South in 1966 at the Geneva Conference on the Church and Society. For these theologians taking responsibility for society was not enough-- social institutions needed to be radically changed. The rhetoric of revolution disrupted the ethics of responsibility and re-framed the struggle for justice from the perspective of the priority of the poor.

The fires of revolution blazed in Latin America. In 1968 Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, to discuss how the church could respond to rampant poverty and seek peace in a culture of violence. Gustavo Gutiérrez was an active participant in those early conversations on liberation. Gutiérrez and other young liberation theologians sought to break the cycle of violence, seeking creative ways of ending “institutional violence.” The ethics of responsibility was not enough because it often took the current social structures for granted, legitimating the status quo.

Liberation theologians called for social disruption, the construction of new and more just social structures. The discourse of liberation captured the imagination of the theologians from the South, gradually leavening the theological conversation in the North. Through grass-roots community organizing among the poor these Latin American activists inaugurated a movement of *comunidades de base* that would seek to embody communal equality and justice at the most local level possible.

In the United States, the struggle for liberation emerged in the fires of the civil rights movement. With deep roots in the movement to abolish slavery, the black freedom struggle during the 1950s and 1960s redirected the prophetic energies of Christianity toward civil rights and ending a racist regime of segregation. Toward the end of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life, he began to expand the focus of the movement from a struggle to end racial segregation in the United States into a struggle for economic human rights throughout the world, symbolized in his plans to launch a Poor People’s Campaign.⁵

Because the National Council of Churches was active in the struggle for civil rights, King’s vision of “beloved community” was one source of ethical inspiration for the liberal environmental movement. King himself began to develop an ecological sensibility in the late sixties, as in his essay, “The World House:”

responsibility in the 1940s-1960s. Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society” in *The Gospel, the Church and the World*, ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette (New York, Harper, 1946), 111-133. For a thoughtful summary of the history of ecumenical ethics see Lewis S. Mudge, “Ecumenical Social Thought” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 3. eds. John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and George Tsesis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), 279-322.

5 On the unfinished legacy of Dr. King and the promise of the Poor Peoples Campaign for reconstituting a poor-led movement for global justice see The Poverty Initiative, Union Theological Seminary, *A New and Unsettling Force: Reigniting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign* (New York: The Poverty Initiative, 2009). Cf. Peter Heltzel, “Radical (Evangelical) Democracy: The Dreams and Nightmares of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Antonio Negri,” *Political Theology* 10/2 (April 2009): 287-303.

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: 'A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.' This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large 'world house' in which we have to live together...a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.⁶

In this passage King deploys the metaphor of a "world house" to convey the deep interconnection of creation. King challenged the world to seek a deeper understanding of the interrelated dynamics that make up our common life on planet earth. Protecting the earth and caring for our neighbors go hand-in-hand as humanity seeks to live together in peace in a world riddled with violence and conflict.

After King's death, Protestantism witnessed a growing environmental awareness in the 1970s. H. Paul Santmire's *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (1970) and John Cobb's *Is It Too Late? (1972)* lifted up ecology as a new frontier for Christian theology and ethics.⁷ The search was on for a new theological vocabulary to engage creation, justice and ecology.

Within liberal theology the discourse of sustainability quickly gained traction within the environmental movement.⁸ The 1974 World Council of Churches conference in Bucharest entitled "Science and Technology for Human Development: the Ambiguous Future—The Christian Hope," introduced the notion of "sustainable society" in ecumenical ethics.⁹ Given concerns about pollution and non-renewable resources a collective call was issued to the human community to live together in a way that would not overly tax the environment, considering the long term health of the environment and future generations.

A watershed moment within the greening of ecumenism took place in 1983 when the "Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) movement was inaugurated at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver, British Columbia.¹⁰ Vigorous ecumenical discussions of the environmental crisis provoked a

6 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The World House," *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 168.

7 H. Paul Santmire, *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1970); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late?: A Theology of Ecology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Bruce, 1972). Cf. for a comprehensive summary of Protestant eco-theology see Robert Booth Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

8 For a brief history of the rise of the discourse of sustainability within liberal environmental ethics see Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (New York: Orbis Press, 1996), 138-154. Process thinkers like John C. Cobb, Jr., were instrumental in the promotion of sustainability discourse within liberal ecotheology. See John Cobb, *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). Cf. Gary Dorrien, "Ecotheology: Sustainability, Justice and the Liberation of Life," *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony & Postmodernity, 1950-2005* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 265-268.

9 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, 138.

10 Wesley Granberg Michaelson, General Secretary of the Reformed Church of America, served the WCC in Geneva in the early 1980s, and with Ulrich Duchrow and Preman Niles was able to help formulate the early JPIC agenda. Upon his return to the United States, Wes Granberg Michaelson

debate within liberal Christian ethics about how to relate a growing concern with sustainability with the commitment to liberate poor communities. The World Council of Churches' statement *Now is the Time*, presented at the World Convocation on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation in Seoul, Korea in March 1990, asserted, "The integrity of creation has a social aspect which we recognize as peace with justice, and an ecological aspect which we recognize in the self-renewing, sustainable character of natural ecosystems."¹¹ Conceiving of the integrity of creation as having a social dimension and ecological dimension was one attempt at bridging the discourse of liberation and sustainability.

In the field of relief and development work, "sustainable development" promised to be a framework that could promote ecological sustainability and economic justice. Yet liberal Protestant ethicists like Larry L. Rasmussen found the notion of sustainable development problematic because of the assumption that unlimited increases in material production necessarily entailed global progress for humanity and the planet.¹² In contrast to the notion of sustainable development, Rasmussen and other liberal ethicists opted for the notion of sustainable community.¹³

Sustainable community became the primary liberal theological strategy for solving environmental problems. Theologically the notion of community is grounded in the stories of Scripture, where throughout human history God is seeking to build a community of love and justice among his people. Following the shift within ecumenical thought to conceive of the *oikoumene* as the whole habitable world, Rasmussen argues that the struggle to build the beloved community must always be conceived and acted upon in harmony with the earth community.¹⁴ The earth community is every creature's home. Earth community provides a

joined other environmental activists in translating JPIC's commitment for just and sustainable communities to both liberal and evangelical communions and movements in the United States. Michaelson's ability to move and communicate in both mainline and evangelical worlds was critical to the ongoing greening of Protestantism. See Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); idem, ed., *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); idem, *Ecology and Life: Accepting our Environmental Responsibility* (Waco, Tex.: World Publishing Group, 1988); idem, *Redeeming the Creation, the Rio Earth Summit Challenge to the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1992).

11 *Now is the Time: The Final Document and Other Texts from the World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 5-12 March 1990 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 18.

12 Larry L. Rasmussen, "Sustainable Development and Sustainable Community: Divergent Paths," in *Development Assessed: Ecumenical Reflections and Actions on Development* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995). Rasmussen's critique of sustainable community was indebted to a report of the Visser't Hooft Memorial Consultation, *Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993).

13 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. For a helpful summary of the ecumenical reflection on sustainable communities, see David J. Wellman, *Sustainable Communities* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2001).

14 Konrad Raiser argues that theologically reimagining the *oikoumene* and an "oikos" or household ushers in a paradigm in ecumenical thought. In this light, Dr. King's invocation of the "world house" metaphor was prescient. Raiser writes, "In the order of relationships within this household, what is decisive is 'habitability,' the sustainability, or capacity for survival, of the inhabited earth. The *oikoumene* as a household, as an 'oikos'—this metaphor is proving to be more and more clearly the

cosmological basis for an earth ethic, an eco-justice movement to build sustainable communities that all people are invited to join.

Human communities are embedded within their natural ecologies; thus, liberal ethics must seek to build local communities that are socially equitable, economically viable, and ecologically renewable. Rasmussen argues that sustainable communities should be marked by the following moral norms: participation, sufficiency, equity, accountability, material simplicity, spiritual richness, responsibility, and subsidiarity.¹⁵ These environmental virtues and values are to be practiced by human communities that understand that the way that they live needs to be in harmony with otherkind and the natural community. For Rasmussen, “earth community is basic.”¹⁶ All human thinking and doing should be done in the context of “the total earth-human process.”¹⁷

In summary, the sustainable community strategy offers an eco-centric alternative to the strong anthropocentric orientation which has plagued the Protestant tradition. Conceiving of human community building in the context of the earth community expanded the discourse of sustainability from sustainable society to a sustainable environment. The world house that Dr. King evoked is the earth community. As members of the earth community, Christian activists must articulate and embody an earth ethic for all creatures and the good creation.

THE EVANGELICAL CREATION CARE STRATEGY

While the liberal Protestant tradition pursued a strategy of sustainable community, evangelical Christians are pursuing a strategy of creation care. While evangelical Christians have often been viewed as resistant to environmental justice work, a new generation of evangelicals is offering strong and consistent leadership in environmental activism. Within evangelical circles, the environmental movement is often called the “creation care movement” because of perceived negative ideological connotations of “environmentalism.” The creation care movement is transforming congregations and creating the conditions for more active evangelical participation in the global environmental movement.

In 1970 evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer fired an initial salvo of the evangelical creation care movement in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*. In 1973 a group of prophetic evangelicals came together to issue an evangelical statement for social justice, called the “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern.”¹⁸ The Chicago Declaration symbolized a new paradigm of Jesus and justice for the evangelical world: “Before God and a billion hungry neighbors,

point around which our thinking about a new paradigm is crystallizing.” Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 87.

15 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 168-173.

16 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 173.

17 Ibid.

18 The Chicago Declaration and critical responses to it can be found in Ronald J. Sider, ed. *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974). See my discussion of the Chicago Declaration and its impact on the prophetic evangelical movement in *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 171 ff.

we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources." The Chicago Declaration recognized global economic injustice, but did not directly address environmental problems. It took time for the environmental movement to gain momentum within the evangelical ranks.

The first theological strategy that evangelicals used to address environmental problems was stewardship.¹⁹ Positively, the biblical portrait of the steward became a motivator for evangelical environmental activists.²⁰ The stewardship strategy found its biblical foundations in the early books of Genesis where humans were called to be fruitful and "subdue" the earth. While the stewardship strategy affirmed the sacredness of creation and God's call to humans to be good stewards of nature, it continued to conceive of the ethical task in largely anthropocentric terms. Creation was viewed as set of natural resources that humans were supposed to manage responsibly. The discourse of managing natural resources as good stewards was susceptible of being drawn into corporate models of management that performed the fundamental logic of a capitalism without limits.²¹

Within the evangelical world the stewardship strategy was co-opted by conservative evangelicals, including many leaders of Religious Right. In October 1999 the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty gathered twenty-five clergy, theologians, economists, environmental scientists and policy experts in Cornwall, Connecticut to develop a "Judeo-Christian" understanding of stewardship to be applied environmental policy. Out of this conference came the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship that was endorsed by many prominent evangelical leaders including Chuck Colson (Prison Fellowship Ministries), James Dobson (Focus on the Family), Diane Knippers (Institute on Religion and Democracy), and P.J. Hill (Association of Christian Economists). The signers of this Declaration continue to refer to themselves as the "Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation," however, the stewardship that they promote entails a strong anthropocentrism, a commitment to libertarian, free market economics, and a deep distrust of mainstream science.

The Cornwall Declaration states "the human person is the most valuable resource on earth." Humans are responsible for managing natural resources and the economy to maximize the freedom of humans and economic markets, promoting "liberty as a condition of moral action is preferred over government-initiated management of the environment as a means to common goals," "private property," and "private, market economies." It is clear that the Cornwall Declaration is more

19 Willis Jenkins sees the stewardship strategy as a framework that describes environmental responsibility in terms of obedience to Christ. See Willis Jenkins, "The Strategy of Christian Stewardship," *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 77-92. Cf. Laurel Kearns, "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 57/1 (1996): 58-60.

20 Douglas John Hall's book *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) popularized the notion of environmental stewardship. Other evangelical works that deployed the stewardship strategy include Loren Wilkenson et al., *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and Art and Jocene Meyer, *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1991).

21 David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, 1996).

than a call to environmental stewardship; it was a vigorous *apologia* for free market capitalism. The Cornwall Declaration also expressed skepticism about science, referring to “unfounded or undue concerns include fears of destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss.”²²

In contrast to the stewardship strategy of the conservative evangelical leaders who signed the Cornwall Declaration, a growing creation care movement emerged within evangelicalism in the 1990s that was more theologically deep, scientifically astute, and generous of spirit. While the stewardship strategy successfully mobilized a growing group of evangelicals to engage environmental concerns in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not able to overcome what Max Weber named as “the Spirit of Capitalism” that plagued mainstream evangelicalism. For these and other reasons, evangelical theologians began to argue that the stewardship strategy was inadequate, and that creation care was a more effective theological strategy for the growing evangelical environmental movement.²³

The creation care movement focused less on utilizing and managing resources and more on contemplating the wonder of creation, seeking to care attentively for it with the benefit of the wisdom of the natural scientists. Evangelical scientists like Cal DeWitt took the lead in directing the creation care movement to become more scientifically astute and ecologically sensitive. The Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies in Michigan has been one of the most important evangelical educational centers that has produced a new generation of evangelical environmental activists who seamlessly integrate biblical theology, environmental science and political advocacy.

While many conservative evangelicals voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004, there was increasing dissatisfaction fomenting within a growing prophetic evangelicalism.²⁴ Environmentalism proved to be a vital issue for this growing constituency. While Jim Ball, the Executive Direction of the Evangelical Environmental Network, had carried the torch of the environmental movement since 1993, he was now joined by Richard Cizik, former Vice President of Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals. In 2002, Richard Cizik went with Jim Ball to a conference on Christianity and the Environment in Oxford,

22 The “Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship,” in *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, 2000), xi-xv. E. Calvin Beisner, a Calvinist “dominion theologian” is one of the theological architects behind the conservative evangelical stewardship strategy represented by the Cornwall Declaration. See E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

23 See R. J. Berry, *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God’s Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1998); H. Paul Santmire, “Partnership with Nature According to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship.” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 32/4 (Summer 2003): 381-412.

24 For a theological and social analysis of the rise of prophetic evangelical politics at the turn of the century see Peter Heltzel and Robin Rogers, “The New Evangelical Politics” *Society* 45/5 (September 2008): 412-415. On the rise of prophetic evangelicals see my “Prophetic Evangelicals: Toward a Politics of Hope,” in *The Sleeping Giant has Awoken: The New Politics of Religion in the United States*. ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Neal Magee (New York: Continuum, 2008), 25-40.

England. Cizik was persuaded by evangelical scientist Sir John Houghton (the first chair of the scientific assessment group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) that climate change was a serious global challenge that was being exacerbated by human activity. Cizik left Oxford with a newfound focus on the disastrous impact of climate change, habitat destruction, and species extinction on earth. After his heart was “strangely warmed” to the cause of creation care, Cizik believed he could no longer escape his biblical responsibility to care for the environment.

Through his visionary leadership the National Association of Evangelicals quickly developed a robust creation care program in 2002. Environmental concern played a central role in the public strategy document of the National Association of Evangelicals, *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility* (2004).²⁵ Two years later in 2006, prophetic evangelicals would join together to sign a statement, “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” In contrast to the Cornwall Declaration, the Evangelical Climate Initiative affirmed the scientific consensus about human-induced climate change. This prophetic evangelical statement affirmed the connection between rising climate change and the loss of human life, especially among the poor, stating, “Millions of people could die in this century because of climate change; most of them are our poorest global neighbors.”²⁶ Within the creation care strategy, human-induced climate change was accepted as an environmental problem that was having an adverse impact on poor communities. There was an igniting of the evangelical environmental imagination.

Cizik seized the moment building a robust creation care program that energized and mobilized evangelical Christian college professors and presidents, mega-church pastors, and community leaders to take creation care seriously and to become actively engaged in related projects. Through publishing, the new social media, conferences, and campaigns, evangelical activists have sought to cultivate a broad-based movement for positive environmental change. It has taken the evangelical environmental movement four decades to come into its own and it has a long way to go, but the evangelical church is seeking to solve environmental problems, in an entrepreneurial style.

One of the projects that Cizik pursued was the Scientist-Evangelical Initiative, a collaboration led by Cizik and Eric Chivian of Harvard Medical School.²⁷ They discovered that scientists and evangelical leaders shared a profound rever-

25 “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation*. ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 363-375.

26 “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” The Evangelical Climate Initiative (2006) in David P. Gushee, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2008), 277.

27 For this work, Cizik and Chivian were recognized in the 2008 Time 100 list of the world’s most influential people. For a summary of the work of the Scientist-Evangelical initiative, including the Alaska Expedition in 2007, see Peter Heltzel and Carl Safina, “Evangelicals for Environmental Responsibility: Religious Leaders and Scientists Uniting to Care for Creation” in Niles Harper, ed. *Journeys Into Justice: Religious Collaboratives Working for Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Bascom Hill Publishing Group, 2008), 285-306.

ence for life on Earth and a deep sense of responsibility about working together to protect it. As part of this initiative, Cizik and Chivian led a scientist-evangelical expedition to Alaska in August 2007 to raise awareness in the evangelical world about the negative human impacts of climate change.

The Religious Right was disturbed by the greening of evangelicalism. During the summer of 2006 when Richard Cizik was arguing that evangelicals should take responsibility for climate change, James Dobson fired back on his radio show saying, “Evangelicals taking on the issue of environment will divide evangelicalism. . . and destroy the U.S. economy.”²⁸ Dobson’s retort unveiled how evangelicalism’s entrepreneurial spirit often mimics a deeper consumption-driven spirit of capitalism. Emphasizing the close relationship between evangelicals and capitalism, William Connolly writes, “The right leg of the evangelical movement is joined at the hip to the left leg of the capitalist juggernaut.”²⁹ Because of the deep connections between nationalist evangelicalism and capitalist consumerism, evangelicalism, even in its prophetic instantiation, often continues to perform a theology of capitalist conquest and white domination even amidst its best attempts to care for creation. Yet, tucked beneath a white, western evangelical modernity is a counter tradition of Christian theology—prophetic black Christianity and Native American Christianity. Prophetic voices of color on the underside of modernity offer an ancient but new perspective on contemporary environmental problems.³⁰

THE PROMISE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

The environmental justice movement provides an important theological and practical corrective to the ways in which liberal and evangelical environmentalism often performs white supremacy and imperial domination. In contrast to the predominately white and middle-class mainstream liberal and evangelical environmental movements, the environmental justice movement begins from the subject position of those with their backs against the wall, particularly women of color. Seeking to solve environmental problems from the sites of greatest human and ecological suffering, the environmental justice movement offers a promising new theological strategy for environmental activism today.

Given five hundred years of white supremacy and colonization in the Americas, directly and honestly addressing the ways that communities of color are adversely affected by environmental imperialism and degradation is integral to Christian environmental ethics. Both the liberal sustainable community strategy and the evangelical creation care strategy have an ecological blind spot when it comes to environmental racism.

Environmental racism is white supremacy in its ecological form. As white colonists raped the land of Native Americans and worked it with enslaved African bodies, the land became an object of white colonial control. The land in colonial

28 Quoted in Richard Cizik’s open letter to James Dobson, previously available on the National Association of Evangelicals’ Website, www.nae.net (accessed May 23, 2006).

29 William Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” *Political Theory* 33:6 (December 2005): 869-886; 874.

30 Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1996).

America was circumscribed and parceled out to become the “private property” of white men. White male land owners were the locus of power in colonial America, the only citizens who had the right to vote. With the rise of the manufacturing economy and industrial pollution, environmental racism took on a new form, as individuals and social systems colluded to reconfigure ecological space so that environmental waste and toxins were brought into close proximity to communities of color, increasing dangerous exposure and health risks to black and brown bodies.³¹ Dumps were built in or besides poor communities.

Toxic-burdened black and brown bodies lay bare the ways in which the problems of race, gender, poverty and the environment are co-extensive.³² While the environmental movement has been principally concerned with preserving land, the environmental justice movement is interested in the adverse effects pollution has had on poor communities of color. The struggle to preserve both the land and human lives is a common struggle for survival, a struggle for justice to be present throughout the whole creation, especially in places of great suffering and marginalization.

While the standard histories trace the environmental justice movement back to the 1970’s and 1980’s, it has even deeper roots in Native American struggles for land sovereignty. Since the advent of colonization, Native Americans have had to deal with the aftermath of “the rape of the land,” the violent seizure of tribal lands by European colonists and later the Federal Government.³³ European colonization in the Americas brought with it both the cultural and ecological expansion of “Europe,” often at the expense of the lives and land of Native Americans.³⁴ Native American activists, including many Christian activists, have been in a constant battle with the United States government and the conservationist movement over the rights to their ancestral lands.³⁵ Native American resistance against the colonial regime of whiteness through seeking to reclaim sovereignty over their tribal lands is the beginning of the environmental justice movement in the United States.

The Native American struggle to recover their land is a struggle to reclaim their identity. In Native American religious life human identity draws much of its meaning from our deep interconnection with the land. Humans are part of what Native American theologian Randy Woodley calls the “community of creation,” where God’s life energies flow through the entire existence of the whole creation.³⁶

31 See Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Cf. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 4-12.

32 Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

33 See Andrea Smith, “Rape of the Land,” Chapter 3, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 55-78.

34 Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansionism of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

35 See Mark Dowie, Introduction: “Enemies of Conservation,” in his *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), xv-xxix.

36 I was first introduced to idea of “the community of creation,” by Randy Woodley at the

Identifying the historic environmental injustices committed against indigene, Native American environmental activists also offers a concrete cosmological alternative to the commodification of land in a corporate, hierarchical ordering of life.

Native Americans seek to live “the harmony way,” a sustainable way of living within a local ecology expressing the natural connectedness that the entire community of creation shares.³⁷ The community of creation shares a common presence and flow of life energies that permeate all living beings. This interconnectedness affects the way that humans are to relate to humankind, otherkind, and natural ecosystem. The harmony way also ensures that the physical structures of the built environment are in synchronization with their natural surroundings. The harmony way is a call to humans to live in forms of community that express our deep interconnection with all living beings within the whole community of creation. The Native American concept of the community of creation in the context of their struggle to reclaim their land provides a post-colonial indigenous cosmology for the work of environmental justice today.

While the environmental justice movement began with the Native American struggle for land sovereignty, it emerged as a broader intercultural social movement in the 1980s. Following an anti-toxins protest in Love Canal, New York in 1978, a vigorous environmental justice protest mounted in Warren County, North Carolina, tapping into a long tradition of faith-rooted organizing that had been deployed in the Civil Rights movement.³⁸ In 1982 a dump was built by the state of North Carolina and Warren County to dispose of contaminated soil that was the result of an illegal PCB dumping incident by Ward Transformer Company of Raleigh, North Carolina. The dump was built in close proximity to African communities, forcing black bodies to bear the environmental burden of illegal industrial pollution. Activists Dollie Burwell and Rev. Ben Chavis led the charge in advocating for these communities of color that were afflicted by the toxic waste from this dump. Rev. Ben Chavis was arrested as a result of his protest activities, carrying on the tradition of non-violent civil disobedience of Gandhi and Dr. King. Meeting in churches to plot resistance and launch protests, the environmental justice movement in North Carolina creatively implemented the church-based organizing strategy of the Civil Rights movement.

In 1987 the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice released the famous *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* report, the first national

Envision Panel of Scholars Meeting at Princeton University in June 2008 and most recently in his lecture, “God’s First Discourse: Connected by the Community of Creation in Harmony” at the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies Annual Symposium in June 2010.

37 For an elaboration of the idea of the “harmony way” see Randy Woodley, *The Harmony Way: Integrating Indigenous Values within Native North American Theology and Mission*. Ph.D. diss., (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 2010). Cf. “Just Land: What Are the Key Justice Issues for Native Peoples in the U.S.?” in *The Justice Project*, ed. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 107-114.

38 Witnessing pollution’s direct effect on her son Michael who had multiple health problems, Lois Gibbs led a community-based protest movement in Love Canal New York, where over 21,000 tons of toxic waste was dumped in a one-mile canal bed close to her neighborhood in Niagara, New York. See Lois M. Gibbs and Murray Levine, *Love Canal: My Story* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982).

study to correlate toxic dumpsite selection with the racial-ethnic composition of the neighborhood in which it was located.³⁹ That same year, sociologist Robert D. Bullard published *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*, which chronicled the use of African-American neighborhoods in Houston as dumping grounds.⁴⁰ The struggle for racial justice took on a new ecological front with fresh momentum as it looked at the ways in which communities of color were adversely affected by pollution and toxic waste. Through these protests and studies in the 1980s, environmental justice emerged as a potent legal concept that could be used in advocacy for the residents of economically disadvantaged areas to ensure pollution control and remediation, as well as sustainable municipal planning and land use.

The environmental justice movement has been the most significant Christian contribution to American environmental thought. It clearly unveils the ways in which environmental degradation negatively impacts communities of color. While it focuses on adverse environmental impacts on poor populations, the environmental justice movement offers a holistic approach to environmental problems that has respect for all life support systems, including human and non-human life. It envisions the conditions through which we can see the full integration of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice and environmental justice. It translates the church-based model of community organizing into the environmental movement. By tapping into the activist energies of the people most directly affected by environmental racism, the environmental justice movement re-directs mainstream environmentalism to seek environmental protection in concert with the struggle for social justice in poor communities.

The environmental justice movement provides a model of privileging the perspective of the poor in Christian ethics. It begins with the concrete conditions of the neighborhoods that we live in, especially poor neighborhoods. It presses us toward a deeper analysis of our local ecologies in order to understand the pathways of injustice. Since all humans are ecologically vulnerable, the environmental justice movement affirms our common humanity. As Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that every individual human being is a child of God made in the *imago Dei* and together we need to learn how to live in the world house, the environmental justice movement, too, emphasizes the dignity of all humans, foregrounding the experiences of the marginalized who suffer the most from environmental degradation.

The environmental justice movement challenges both liberal and evangelical Christians to actively respond to the physical suffering and ecological vulnerabilities of poor communities. While liberal theology and activism was one stream that informed the environmental justice movement in the 1980s, environmental

39 *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ (New York: Public Data Access, 1987). Twenty years after this report a new report was issued to document environmental racism during the previous two decades. See Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, and Beverly Wright, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007: Grassroots Struggles to Dismantle Environmental Racism in the United States*. (Cleveland, OH: United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, 2007).

40 Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 1987).

justice stands in critique of the liberal sustainable community strategy. Willis Jenkins writes, “By tracing racist and sexist logics of domination, environmental justice laid open the way to an entirely distinct practical strategy.”⁴¹ Its distinct contribution comes from its subject position within communities of color, focusing especially on women of color who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. Furthermore, since women of color largely lead the environmental justice movement, the movement stands as a critique of the largely white male power structures at play in both evangelical and liberal Protestant institutions. By pressing us to develop critical race and gender analyses of existing Protestant environmental activism, the movement can open up new possibilities for social transformation and ecological renewal. Rather than a top-down leadership style, the environmental justice movement seeks to promote the *self-determination* of local communities of color, developing local leadership capable of creatively and prophetically engaging the problems of environmental racism through organic, local community organizing.

Foregrounding the experiences of women of color provides a hermeneutical lens for developing a prophetic Christian environmental ethic. As we work toward an ecological doctrine of creation we need to use an “interactionalist” social analysis that considers the deep interconnections of race, class, gender, theology and ecology. Martin Luther King, Jr. modeled this form of social analysis when he named the “giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” in his “A Time to Break Silence” speech at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967.⁴² Since Dr. King was brutally murdered a year to the day later on April 4, 1968 while leading a protest of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, we could add environmental injustice to the list of oppressive evils. For in his advocacy on behalf of sanitation workers who were collecting other people’s trash and taking it to the dump, King anticipated the poor-led environmental justice movement interrogation of where those dumps were located and how these urban spatial configurations revealed what Emilie Townes calls “contemporary versions of lynching a whole people.”⁴³

Patriarchy is another oppressive evil that would become more deeply interrogated by feminist, womanist, eco-feminist, and queer scholars in the post-Civil Rights period. Thus, this multi-dimensional social analysis should be complemented by an intercultural, eco-feminist hermeneutic that engages environmental problems from the perspectives of communities of color and their grass-roots organizing efforts, particularly those of women of color. This intercultural, eco-feminist, and pragmatic hermeneutic offers evangelicals and liberals an important resource for self-critique, social transformation, and environmental renewal.⁴⁴ Focusing on

41 Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 95.

42 Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 240.

43 Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 55 as quoted by Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 94.

44 Kwok Pui-lan has emphasized the intercultural dimension of feminist theology. See her “Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed.

concrete environmental injustices creates a new opportunity for more generous, interfaith community-based coalitions for justice in our pluralistic world.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

The environmental justice movement provides a vital new trajectory for prophetic Protestant theology and ethics today. Focusing on the negative impacts of environmental degradation on communities of color, the environmental justice movement unveils the spectre of white supremacy that hovers over Protestantism in the United States. Offering an anti-racist, eco-feminist, and pragmatic approach to environmental ethics, the environmental justice movement presents the opportunity for deeper collaboration between evangelicals and liberals in seeking to collectively eradicate environmental injustices.

No matter if the “two-party system” ever adequately described Protestantism, a politics of separatism is no longer an option. The future of the earth is at stake. Given the urgency and extent of current ecological challenges, it is vital to continue to create new forums to heal the division between liberals and evangelicals; this work can even be construed as part of the process of repairing the earth.

Jewish thinkers speak of *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world, and healing the shattered shalom of the community of creation is a pressing global challenge that must be addressed now. Beginning at the sites of most ecological suffering, the environmental justice movement seeks to heal the community of creation, restoring health and hope to our local ecologies. In order to break the binary logic of the evangelical-liberal divide and work toward a reparative hermeneutic and environmental ethic, prophetic Protestants need to join the environmental justice movement, led by the poor, for the healing of the earth.

There are periods in history when humanity is at a crossroads, when the paths that are followed influence large numbers of people in fundamental ways for hundreds of years. We are in one of those periods right now, as the decisions we make over the next decade about the global environment will affect the health and lives of billions of people worldwide for countless generations. Religious commu-

Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23-39. Through an intentional, ongoing process of de-colonization we can collectively work toward what Jace Weaver calls a “We-Hermeneutics.” See Jace Weaver, “From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics: Native Americans and the Post-Colonial,” in *Native American Religious Identity*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998). For a feminist deconstruction of the problem with white, western, and male modes of knowing with a presentation of an eco-feminist epistemology see Ivone Gebara, “Knowing our Knowing: The Issue of Epistemology,” *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 19-66.

45 Working toward the healing of liberal and evangelical communions in the context of the environmental justice movement takes place in multifaith context. Paul Knitter’s inter-religious approach to ecological justice offers an important horizon for engaging in the deep complexities and transformative possibilities of interfaith organizing for environmental justice as a source for a global earth ethic. See Paul F. Knitter, “Religion and Globality: Can Interreligious Dialogue Be Globally Responsible?” in *A Dome of Many Colors: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity, and Unity*. Ed. Arvind Sharma and Kathleen M. Dugan (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 104-136; idem, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); Cf. Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *Liberating Faith: Religious Voices for Justice, Peace and Ecological Wisdom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

nities have a vital role to play in creating communities of transformation committed to environmental justice and the preservation of the future of the planet. Through becoming active participants in the environmental justice movement, prophetic Protestants can offer a new united front for the ecological good of the whole community of creation.