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## **Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective**

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It is clear to anyone who moves in Protestant evangelical circles that concern for the environment is infrequently expressed. I have never heard any sermons preached on the environment other than those I have preached myself. There is a flurry of books being written by evangelicals urging Christians to care for the environment, but with a couple of exceptions they are at the popular level and have a breathless feel, as if they know they are late in jumping on the environmental bandwagon. There is an International Evangelical Environment Network, but its concerns are not widely discussed in the evangelical mainstream (see the websites at Evangelical Environment Network [UK] 1998; Evangelical Environment Network [USA] 1998). I know of no general evangelical text in missiology that mentions either the environment or ecojustices in its index.

Is this general impression that evangelicals struggle to express a concern for the environment borne out by empirical studies? The answer, from the few studies done in North America and in Australia, is not straightforward. Overall, Christian belief is a statistically small factor in affecting people's attitudes and behaviour towards the environment, much less important than age, gender, education and class (Blombery 1996; Hughes 1997: 14; Eckberg & Blocker 1989). To the extent that religious belief is a factor, it is a negative one (Black 1996: 46). This, however, masks the effects of quite different Christian beliefs. Closer examination shows that those Christians who value the environment as God's creation are likely to show high environmental concern, whereas those who adhere to the literal interpretation of the Genesis passage giving humanity dominion over the earth show low environmental concern (Hughes 1997: 20). The overall weakness of Christian belief as a factor in environmental concern, therefore, is the result of two opposing attitudes more or less cancelling each other out. Christian belief matters, but in different ways. To complicate matters further, when we ask whether it is conservative theology rather than a generally conservative world-view which leads to low

environmental concern the answer is uncertain. One study seems to show that it is a conservative world-view and not theological conservatism that counts (Greeley 1993: 26), but the two do seem to be frequently connected. Overall, the evidence does point weakly to conservative Christians showing less inclination than others to engage in environmentally protective behaviour (Eckberg & Blocker 1989; Greeley 1993: 26; Kanagy & Nelsen 1995; Blombery 1996: 9; Black 1996: 45), but calls for a more nuanced examination of Christian beliefs.

What I will attempt here is a survey of the theological reasons which are likely to make the partnership between evangelicalism and ecojustice an awkward one. It seems that there are some emphases typical of evangelicalism that make it more difficult for evangelicals than for mainstream Protestants to pursue ecojustice, though not impossible.<sup>1</sup>

I will take ecojustice to mean 'respect and fairness toward all creation, human and nonhuman' (Gibson 1977: 318-19). Concern for ecojustice implies a strongly ecological perspective, which sees humanity to be in intimate interdependence with the rest of creation. An ecojustice perspective sees links between various types of domination, whether of class, gender, race or nature (Plumwood 1993: 1-2). It sees social justice and protection of the environment as connected rather than in opposition. It attributes intrinsic value to the whole created order, both human and non-human. The Christian pursuit of ecojustice is based on a holistic view of salvation, which sees human transformation as only completely possible in a restored environment.

Defining evangelicalism is difficult, as there are many varieties and many exceptions. Let us take the movement to be typically marked by a high view of the authority of Scripture, an emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a consequent emphasis on evangelism and personal conversion, and an adherence to a set of doctrines thought to be part of classical Christianity and defended with vigour (Bassett 1991; Erickson 1993; Giles 1995). Mainstream evangelicalism is typified by groups such as the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Lausanne Movement.

The argument to be made here is that whereas Christian theology as a whole has tended to undervalue an ecological perspective, evan-

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. We might suggest that Catholicism contains within it a theological spectrum similar to that of Protestantism, with fundamentalists and liberals lining up roughly similarly. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, seems to have a particularly good theological platform on which to build concern for ecojustice.

gical beliefs have done so to a greater extent. Many contemporary Protestant theologians have reworked the relationships between God, humans and the world, but evangelicalism has defended what it calls 'historic biblical Christianity'. In doing so, it has emphasized a particular strand of Christianity which focuses largely on human sin and forgiveness. Therefore it will be quite a challenge for evangelicalism to give the environment its place and to integrate successfully evangelism, social justice and environmental concern.

I wish to make five theological comments, as well as two observations of a sociological nature about evangelical attitudes to environmentalism.

First, *evangelical views of the gospel are almost exclusively centred on the personal salvation of humans*. As Chris Sugden, director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, says:

It is hard for evangelicals to take the environment seriously as a mission concern. Evangelicals are 'gospel people', and the gospel is focused on the salvation of people from sin. Ideas that the trees and the land and the rivers, let alone the foxes and the butterflies are worth the time, attention, and resources of the Christian constituency have struggled to find acceptance in evangelical counsels (1993: 119).

While the relationship between God and humans is central to the Christian gospel according to all Christian traditions, an exclusively anthropocentric view of salvation neglects the cosmos. Several evangelical writers point this out, and insist that redemption includes the renewal of the whole of creation and not just humans (Wilkinson 1991: 303-306; DeWitt 1991: 39-41; Sine 1991; Elsdon 1992: 162-65). All writers use the Romans 8 passage that speaks of the whole of creation longing eagerly for full redemption. It is interesting that in order to argue the case, two of these writers turn to Eastern Orthodoxy, rather than the evangelical tradition (Wilkinson; DeWitt). Bruce Nicholls, on the other hand, draws from the evangelical tradition when he laments the lack of concern about environmental issues and argues that hope for eternal life should always be linked with resurrection of the body and the re-creation of God's creation (1993: 219). Winston Persaud delves into the Lutheran tradition and argues that what is needed today is the broadening of the idea of 'neighbour' to include nature (1992: 296).

The human-centred perspective on salvation is linked to two other emphases in evangelical writing: the fall-redemption framework and human uniqueness.

As Matthew Fox has argued well, Augustine and his interpreters have tended to make human sinfulness the starting-point of the

Christian story of redemption, whereas the goodness and beauty of creation ought to be the starting-point (Fox 1983: 46-51). To emphasize the 'fall' of humanity and God's response in redemption is to push to the background ongoing creation and new creation, which are arguably the broader canvas of the Christian story. It has even contributed to the tendency to label the material world as evil (Drane 1993: 9). The Christian understanding of salvation has often narrowed to encompass only the personal, the spiritual and forgiveness of sin, instead of encompassing renewal in all dimensions of the cosmos (DeWitt 1991: 41). It is difficult to argue effectively for the pursuit of ecojustice in such a human-centered framework, first, because justice takes a secondary role to personal forgiveness, and secondly, because the rest of creation is reduced to a mere backdrop.

Humanity, everyone will agree, is both embedded in creation and yet in some way unique among God's creatures. On the spectrum between seeing humans as animals among others and seeing humans as quite separate from the rest of creation, evangelicals tend to position themselves further towards separateness. 'We are free to use the earth for our own purposes', writes Ronald Sider. 'Created in the divine image, we alone have been placed in charge of the Earth' (Sider 1993: 27). Although Sider goes on to say that we should exercise a thoughtful stewardship, he obviously relishes humanity's vice-regal status and sees humans as well elevated above the rest of creation. Evangelicals, in being committed to a high view of the authority of the Bible, tend not to reject the notion of 'dominion', even where it is softened by reference to notions of stewardship or servanthood. Ecojustice, on the other hand, involves a very strong ecological sense, which leads to a greater emphasis on human interconnectedness with the earth. Sider acknowledges that the non-human creation has its own worth and dignity but fails to see that there is a real tension between the earth having intrinsic value and humanity being free to use it for our own purposes.

The second theological observation to make about the challenge evangelicalism faces if it is to pursue ecojustice is that *God's transcendence tends to be over-emphasized* (Nicholls 1993: 211). The statement on 'Evangelical Christianity and the Environment' which was issued from the World Evangelical Fellowship forum held at the Au Sable Institute in Michigan in 1992 probably states a balanced position when it affirms that 'God is clearly distinct from and yet infinitely involved in creation' (World Evangelical Fellowship 1993: §1.2, 27). But it goes on to favour the use of masculine imagery for God specifically because it helps to heighten a sense of God's distance from the

world (§1.3, 28; see also Wilkinson 1993: 188). Loren Wilkinson talks of God being 'completely distinct from creation' in that God 'upholds it, but is not present in it' (1991: 280, 281). He says that 'there is a fundamental duality, and it is between the universe and its Creator' (1993: 186-87; see also Wright 1993: 153).

There is, of course, a good theological case to be made for distinguishing between creator and creation. It is this distinction that separates pantheism (which affirms that God is all and all is God), normally considered a Christian heresy, from panentheism (which affirms that God is in all and all is in God), normally considered orthodox. Panentheism sees God as original and as more than ('beyond') creation, and therefore in some sense transcendent.

Nevertheless what sustains the pursuit of ecojustice is a lively sense of the intimate presence of God in creation through the Spirit. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the God-world relationship reflects the reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration we understand to be characteristic of the divine trinity (Moltmann 1985: 17). It is not a hierarchical relationship, nor one of distance. It involves a sacramental view of the universe (Fox 1983: 90). Meister Eckhart, on the one hand, says 'We must learn to penetrate things and find God there' (Fox 1993: 90). Aub Podlich, reflecting an evangelical view on the other, says, 'What are you hoping to find [when you romanticize the bush]? Peace and beauty belong to the Lord, not to the tree. Would you understand me if I said there is no beauty outside God?' (1989: 25). There seems to be both an affirmation that God is intimately involved in creation and a denial that divinity really touches the material sphere. God and nature are held apart despite affirmations to the contrary. 'God is external to creation' (Nicholls 1993: 213). The intrinsic value of the environment, in this framework, is diminished and therefore the pursuit of ecojustice becomes harder to justify. Indeed, in popular evangelical literature Christians are sometimes counselled not to take environmental action because it brings us too close to pantheism and panentheism (DeWitt 1993: 144).

If the first two observations touch on the doctrines of the human person and God's relationship to the world, the third is about Christology. *Evangelicals tend to emphasize the historical Jesus and his atoning work at the expense of Christ the cosmic creator.* In a related way, many Christians allow Christ the redeemer to be separated from God the creator, so much so that for some Christ even saves us out of creation (DeWitt 1993: 138). This observation is linked to our first, which noted a tendency for evangelicals to have an exclusively human-centred view of salvation, which devalues the pursuit of ecojustice.

Evangelicals focus on the substitutionary atonement achieved on the cross 2000 years ago, following Augustine and Anselm rather than Irenaeus. Picking up and exaggerating some of Luther's emphases, evangelicals sometimes tend to proclaim only Christ the Saviour (at the expense of the trinity), only grace (at the expense of nature), only faith (at the expense of a faith that expresses itself in works) and only Scripture (at the expense of exegeting the world around us).

The doctrine of the cosmic Christ, on the other hand, affirms that Christ the redeemer is also the Word active in creation from the beginning, holding together all things (Jn 1, Heb. 1, Eph. 1, Col. 1). Furthermore, the doctrine of the incarnation holds together the Divine Word and the redeeming Son. In the light of the importance of the cosmic theme in the New Testament, DeWitt finds it hard to understand why evangelicals, who hold Scripture in high esteem, have often been the last to see that reconciliation between humans and their creator will be incomplete without a reconciliation with the creation from which they are estranged (DeWitt 1991: 29).

A fourth observation is that *evangelicals often hold to an apocalyptic and otherworldly hope for the future*. As a teenager I used to sing 'This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through'. Many Christians follow Augustine in seeing this world merely as a colony of heaven and look with longing towards the heavenly Jerusalem (Gomes 1977: 330). A majority of evangelicals have an expectation that the world will get worse until Jesus returns to bring in a period of harmony and peace. Paradoxically, news of disasters can even prompt satisfaction that God's dramatic intervention is close at hand (Campolo 1992: 93; DeWitt 1993: 143-44; Sine 1992: 34). This eschatological reason for not acting towards ecojustice is to be heard frequently in evangelical churches, particularly among the young.

It is not easy in this framework to encourage a genuine engagement with the natural world. A prophetic voice to change things here and now can be sought (Williams 1994: 150-53), but it requires a greater acceptance that in the incarnation God has affirmed the worth of this world and poured Godself into it. Evangelicals may find it possible to recover the biblical vision of a renewed earth and to discover in kingdom theology the materials for an ultimate hope that is solidly rooted on this earth. The statement on 'Evangelical Christianity and the Environment' points in this direction when it speaks of holding together the threefold relationship between God, creation and humanity. It calls us to look forward to ultimate fulfilment in terms of God, the new people of God and the liberation of all creation (World Evangelical Fellowship 1993: §1.5, 28).

Fifthly, many evangelicals believe that *reality is divided into spirit, which is ultimately real, and physical matter, which is at the least unimportant and perhaps even sinful* (Drane 1993: 7). I suggested earlier that Christian theology as a whole has tended to undervalue ecojustice principles and that evangelical beliefs have done so to a greater extent. The persistence of spirit-matter dualism is a good example. It is not found in the Hebrew world-view, nor in the Gospels, though Paul's writings show a Hellenistic influence and are open to dualistic interpretation. Christian dualism of spirit and matter has been entrenched since Patristic times, and has only been seriously challenged in this century. It elevates spirit and relegates matter as ultimately unimportant (Collins 1995: 96-110).

A dualism is not just the division of reality into two basic types of 'substance' but, as Val Plumwood has shown, is a social and conceptual construction where one type of thing is seen as superior and the other is defined as inferior (1993: 41-68). Evangelicals tend not to be aware of the connections between dualisms such as spirit-matter, reason-nature, male-female, mind-body, master-slave, universal-particular and so on (Plumwood 1993: 43).

The importance of spiritual issues relative to physical or social matters was, of course, a major reason for the evangelical withdrawal from social concern in reaction to the social gospel early in the twentieth century. Some Christians struggle to hear the message that someone else's poverty is our spiritual issue; it is even more difficult to hear that the fate of an endangered species, or a stretch of wilderness, is also a spiritual issue. Social injustice clearly extinguishes the spirit of oppressed people. Does environmental injustice also extinguish spirit? Not, it seems, if God is somewhere else; not if matter ultimately does not matter (Collins 1995).

The sixth comment is more sociological than theological. *Evangelicals often fail to pursue ecojustice simply because of fear that it might lead to New Age thinking*. They are careful about potential heresy and draw boundaries readily in defence of sometimes unfashionable traditional Christian beliefs. Fundamentalists, who are the most conservative evangelicals, are strongly oppositional in stance and often see Satanic conspiracies. The defensive tone of a lot of evangelical writing on the environment is striking. Writers often claim that Christians need to say something positive in order to regain the initiative, but not what the green movement is saying (DeWitt 1993: 44; Elsdon 1992: 7, 15; Nichols 1993: 210; Podlich 1989: 25; Sider 1993: 26; Wilkinson 1987). The title of a book by Tony Campolo, aimed at Christian university students, illustrates this caution, as well as quite a measure of human

confidence: *How to Rescue the Earth without Worshipping Nature: A Christian's Call to Save Creation* (1992). Ecojustice, on the other hand, calls for coalitions, networks and a stronger sense of what is held in common than of what divides.

The seventh and final comment, also largely sociological, is that *evangelical activism tends to distract Christians from the full enjoyment of creation which would foster a pursuit of ecojustice*. Bruce Nicholls says: 'Evangelicals are activists and generally know little of contemplative prayer, fasting, and meditation. Few are able to be still and silent before their Creator' (1993: 213). Calvin DeWitt calls for Christians to appreciate the environment, to esteem and cherish it on the way to becoming committed to defend and nourish it (1993: 148). Speaking practically, the lack of involvement in environmental groups by very active Christians may simply be an expression of their priorities (Blombery 1996: 8). It would help those who are over-busy to draw on the Christian traditions (shared by evangelicals with other Christians) of grace, mystery, wonder, awe and faith (as distinct from 'works').

I have suggested seven reasons why evangelicals are likely to find it difficult to embrace the pursuit of ecojustice. The seeds for making it easier are embedded in the discussion of the seven points made. Consider each in turn, simply stated here without expansion.

1. A cosmic view of salvation will balance the human-centred soteriology of many evangelicals.
2. An understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent, one which is already found in several evangelical sources, will restore a lively sense of God's intimate involvement in creation.
3. A broader view of the atonement which links the redeeming work of Christ to his role as the creative and originating Divine Word will hold together creation and redemption more easily.
4. A stronger affirmation of the value of this world to God, as demonstrated in the incarnation, will offset and balance the otherworldly hopes so common in evangelical thinking.
5. An affirmation of the goodness of the material world, and even better, new integrated ways of conceiving the relationship of spirit and matter, will overcome the destructive dualism of spirit and matter.
6. A willingness to work with others of like mind is needed to overcome the fear of the New Age.



7. Finally, a healthy sense of wonder and grace may allow a livelier relationship with creation which will nourish the pursuit of ecojustice.

Many of these tendencies more sympathetic to the pursuit of ecojustice are discernible in varying degrees in recent evangelical writing on the environment. Whether they reach the pews, and whether these themes can be successfully developed without evangelicals feeling they have sold out their faith, remains to be seen.

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