

Framing the Environment: The Cornwall Alliance, Laissez-faire Environmentalism, and the Green Dragon

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Abstract

Religious discourse plays an important role in U.S. public debates on environmental policy. In this paper, we examine an aspect of this discourse, focusing on the discursive frame adopted by conservative evangelical elites as they promote religious interpretations of the environment distinct from more pro-environmental factions. Using qualitative document analysis of the *Resisting the Green Dragon* lecture series, sponsored by the Cornwall Alliance, we identify four key themes to this frame: (1) environmentalism is not science, (2) but a religion, (3) which threatens Christianity, and (4) personal and political freedom. These interrelated themes focus on denying or neutralizing scientific claims of environmental degradation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, counter moral claims advanced by more pro-environmental factions by linking a religious form of laissez-faire environmentalism to ethical considerations salient among evangelicals.

Key Words: Environment, Religion, Christianity, Social Movements

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INTRODUCTION

Theological commitments are frequently cited as key factors limiting broad-based support for environmental policies. Principal among those cited is a ‘dominion mandate’ based on an interpretation of Genesis 1:28 (NRSV), which states:

God blessed [Adam and Eve], and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth.”

White (1967:82) surmises that a Judeo-Christian interpretation of this mandate made it possible to exploit nature ‘in a mood of indifference’ and set the stage for the current ecological crisis by fostering the belief that God intended the earth for the benefit and rule of mankind. White’s thesis is often drawn upon to support the assertion that conservative Christians, and particularly evangelicals, tend to adopt an exploitative view of the environment and stand neutral or resistant to policies geared toward environmental protection. The contention that a majority of evangelicals is ‘anti-environmental’ is hard to sustain, however, looking at recent figures (see Table 1 below). While polls suggest that evangelicals are slightly conservative on environmental issues, they are by no means monolithic in their views – a point underscored in numerous studies on evangelicals and environmentalism (e.g. Kearns, 1996; McCammack, 2007; Djupe and Hunt, 2009; Wilkinson, 2012; Piefer, Ecklund and Fullerton, 2014).

Table 1: Environmental Attitudes among Evangelical Protestants relative to Total U.S. Population

Is There Solid Evidence the Earth is Warming?¹		
	Evangelical Protestants	Total U.S. Population
Yes, because of human activity	41.5%	37.7%
Yes, because of natural patterns	16.7%	18.5%
No	25.8%	28.3%
Mixed evidence/Some evidence/Don't know	16.0%	15.5%
If we do not change things dramatically global climate change will have disastrous effects²		
Strongly Disagree	18.2%	10.6%
Disagree	15.9%	13.2%
Agree	31.4%	32.8%
Strongly Agree	22.9%	34.7%
Undecided	11.6%	8.7%
Whether you think we're spending too much money on the environment, too little money or about the right amount on the environment³		
Too little	47.0%	57.5%
About right	35.8%	31.2%
Too much	17.2%	11.3%

Sources:

¹ Pew Research Center: Religion and Politics Survey (November 2011)

² Baylor Religion Survey, Wave II (2007)

³General Social Survey, (2012)

Evangelical Protestantism is characterized by shared beliefs in the authority of the Bible, assumptions about the pervasiveness of human sinfulness as a consequence of the fall, the conviction that salvation is made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, and the importance of leading others to salvation through Christ (Hempel and Bartkowski, 2008). Although evangelicals share important theological and cultural elements in common, they do not comprise a homogenous group (see Woodberry and Smith, 1998). This is particularly the case when it comes to the environment. There is no commonly accepted theology of the natural world among evangelicals. Instead, the environment remains a highly contested issue with countervailing interpretations being advanced on how the Bible and Christian ethics apply to environmental concerns and action.

In this paper we seek to further understanding of more conservative evangelical orientations to the environment by examining elite discourse on this issue. The study is largely exploratory in nature and provides a preliminary descriptive analysis of the discursive frame adopted by conservative elites as they

promote religious interpretations of the environment distinct from more pro-environmental factions. A number of studies provide in-depth analysis of more pro-environment factions among evangelicals (cf. Kearns 1996; Wilkinson 2010; 2012; Smith and Brannan, 2013). We believe a similar degree of attention to more conservative factions is warranted given the substantial influence of conservative elites on public life and the ‘ethically charged’ nature of policies that concern the environment (see Wardekker, Petersen, and van der Sluijs, 2009: 513).

Why focus on elite discourse? Elites are considered to be fundamental to the success of social movements as they shape environments influencing policy and the direction of social change, delineate and maintain the movement’s boundaries, and provide ‘elite cues’ that influence public opinion (Tarrow, 1994; Diani, 1996; Minkoff, 1997; Andrews 2011; Bullock, 2011; Khan, 2012). In recent times, evangelical rhetoric and religious discourse has increasingly entered the public eye (Kohut, 2000; Schmalzbauer, 2003; Smith, 2006; McCammack, 2007; Sager, 2009; Wilcox, 2010) and debates among evangelical leaders and organizations are found to influence voting patterns among evangelicals, as well as broader U.S. public understanding of environmental issues (Smith and Leiserowitz, 2013: 1009). Furthermore, across all audiences, scientific communication is found to have little impact on public concern about the environment (Nisbet, 2009:14); political communications appear to be more important with elite partisan battles having the greater influence on public opinion (Brulle, Carmichael, and Jenkins, 2012: 185). Among evangelical elites, these ‘battles’ concern the environmental actions evangelicals ought to take as Christians in the world, with lines broadly drawn between advocates of creation care or eco-justice and more conservative counterparts.

Lindsay’s Model of Elite Agency (2007; 2008) suggests that personal meaning systems for evangelical elites often lead them to engage in big-vision projects that attempt to provide a cohesive evangelical vision into the public sphere. This cultural product—like the video series, *Resisting the Green Dragon*—reaches other evangelicals and influences policy orientations by drawing on a shared base of evangelical meaning systems which puts forth an expressive symbolism that speaks to

evangelicals. Evangelical grassroots movements follow suit as clear boundaries are drawn between allies and adversaries (Lindsay 2007: 52). Evangelical elites are then able to marshal their influence through drawing on their extensive networks and convening power, although this power does not always translate into specific outcomes and effective change (Lindsay 2008). Nevertheless, Lindsay (2007:52) maintains that, “American evangelicalism has gained political momentum as its leaders have built coalitions with other who are interested in similar objectives.”

Following a brief review of relevant literature below, we explore how the environment is framed by the Cornwall Alliance in ways that draw on shared evangelical meaning system. The primary source of data collected is a lecture series sponsored by the Cornwall Alliance, a prominent evangelical-orientated environmentalist organization. The series, entitled *Resisting the Green Dragon*, includes lectures and commentaries by theologians, academics, policy leaders, scientists, and religious elites (see Table 2). Using qualitative document analysis of the lecture series, we identify four interrelated themes – environmentalism is not science, but a religion, which threatens Christianity, and personal and political freedom. These themes center on countering scientific claims about environmental degradation and, perhaps more importantly, advance moral claims about how Christians ought to engage with the environment. Our analyses examines how these themes are linked to and interconnected with a set of ethical considerations salient among evangelicals in ways that counter the nature of and necessity for actions advocated for by more pro-environmental factions. We conclude that these linkages relate the environment to a set of perceived moral imperatives associated with, but not reducible, to a dominion mandate by promoting a religious form of laissez-fair environmentalism as environmental stewardship.

White's Thesis

In a seminal article published in 1967, White argues that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for environmental degradation. White (1967: 1205) contends that Judeo-Christian values, as advanced in the West, promoted the view that nature has no reason for existence, save to serve humankind. This,

White reasons, established a dualism of human and nature and promoted the belief that it is God's will that humans exploit nature for their own ends.

Several scholars find evidence consistent with White's claims. For example, using data from national surveys, Guth et al find (1995) observe that Christian beliefs concerning biblical inerrancy and dispensationalism are negatively related to support for environmental protection. Moreover, these beliefs served as more robust predictors of attitudes towards environmental policy than measures of religious affiliation, commitment, and involvement, leading them to conclude that evangelicals "are conservative on environmental issues because of what they believe, not where they *belong*" (Guth et al. 1995: 974). More mixed findings are reported by Sherkat and Ellison (2007). Drawing on GSS data, they find that conservative Protestants are no less likely than other religious traditions to view environmental degradation as a serious problem. However, conservative Protestants were less likely to indicate they would make sacrifices for the environment or to engage in environmental activism, particularly when they held views of Biblical inerrancy. In contrast, Wolkomir, Futreal, Woodrum and Hoban (1997:339) observed that although conservative Protestants were more likely to hold traditional dominionist beliefs, "denominational predispositions toward dominion belief do not significantly impact the environmental attitudes and behaviors" Insofar as predispositions towards dominionism were found, they were more likely to result from demographic characteristics than from affiliation with any particular religious group.

These mixed findings have placed into question the value of White's thesis for understanding the influence of religious beliefs and affiliation on environmentalism. To be sure, the varied findings result, in part, from different measures of religiosity used, but this itself points to a broader set of questions concerning how 'Judeo Christian values' can and should be operationalized to shed light on the potential relationship between religious orientations and the environment. White's thesis is further criticized for being too monolithic given the large variation in beliefs among religious traditions (Guth 1995: 378; Wolkomir et al, 1997: 326). Scholars counter that Judeo Christian values promote an ethic of care and

stewardship for the environment, not of exploitation, and point to the relatively high rates of pro-environmentalist concerns and behaviors among Jewish, Catholic and ‘mainline’ Protestant denominations (Land and Moore, 1992; Kearns, 1996; Downs and Weigert, 1999; Hayes and Marangudakis, 2000). Moreover, in addition to potentially significant denominational differences in how nature is viewed, White’s interpretation of the relationship between the environment and Christian theology may, in fact, be wrong. DeWitt (1987:1), a leading scholar on evangelical thought, argues “it is not the Judeo-Christian scriptures which lie at the root of this crisis, rather it is what these scriptures warn against: arrogance, ignorance, and greed.” Similarly Smith and Brannan (2013:171) maintain that not only is the exploitation of resources contrary to Christian principles, it leads to unjust conditions and therefore contradicts the Christian call for justice. Lastly, a number of scholars criticize White’s work because it implies a relatively constant relationship between religion and attitudes toward the environment (see Danielson, 2013; Djupe and Hunt, 2009). This belies the dynamic and contentious terrain in which moral evaluations of environmentalism are currently embedded. Among evangelicals, the environment remains a highly debated issue (Smith and Johnson, 2010) and, unlike abortion or same-sex marriage, there is no dominant view expressed by a strong plurality. Instead, there exists “a great diversity in understanding how faith should inform environmental views specifically and political orientations more generally” (Danielson, 2013:201). Danielson (2013) further observes that not only has attention to environmental issues increased among evangelicals in recent years, the issue has become more polarized and politicized, particularly among evangelical elites, resulting in what she defines as a developing cultural ‘battle’ with implications for both the global environment and U.S. politics.

FRAMING THE ENVIRONMENT

A deeper understanding of the discursive frame advanced by conservative activists is warranted to gain deeper understanding of the stakes of this ‘battle’. Benford (1997:416), drawing on earlier work with Snow (1988), defines framing as the processes associated with assigning meaning to or interpreting relevant events and conditions in ways intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to

garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists. A discursive frame is a set of cultural orientations which inform the practices of a community by defining its goals and purposes (Brulle, 2012:85; Brulle and Benford, 2012:64). Each frame provides the 'fundamental categories' in which thinking about an issue takes place. This has particular relevance for the environment. As Brulle (2000: 79) observes:

A movement's discursive frame creates a binding definition of the situation. Accordingly, this frame enables certain aspects of the world to be seen, and excludes others... This discourse can illuminate or mask considerations of the causes of ecological degradation. When it obscures or limits consideration of other alternatives, it can limit the range of options considered, and the possible means of resolving environmental problems.

Frames rarely exist in isolation, however. Frames that promote the need for, and morality of, certain actions are often countered by opposing frames that undermine or minimize these claims and attempt to direct attention to alternative understandings and solutions (Gamson, 1992: 7; Johnston and Noakes, 2005:8-9; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Indeed, Gamson (1992:67) observes, one can view social movement actors as being engaged in 'symbolic contests' over which meaning will prevail with each side trying to establish their claims and discredit their opponents. Frames and counterframes evolve in contestation with each other and cannot be disentangled because each responds to and engages with the language of the other (Esacove, 2004:72). This 'dialectical dance' (Sewell, 1992:57) or 'talk and talk back' (Steinberg, 1999:376) which constitutes the discursive field sets the conventions and range of interpretive possibilities used to make sense of an issue by defining why it is important, how it relates to other issues, and the way in which it can be resolved (Wuthnow, 1989: 13; Steinberg, 1998). In turn, these vocabularies shape public understandings of the actions that are necessary, effective, legitimate and morally right in addressing environmental concerns (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005: 30; see also Gamson, 1992; Benford and Hunt, 2003).

The framing strategies adopted by social movement organizations tend not to define new cultural norms and social understandings, but instead build upon and align with existing precepts and ideologies (Nisbet 2009:17, Snow et al 1986: 467; Tarrow 1992). This may be particularly the case with moral framing. Moral frames interpret issues based on existing distinctions between what is right and what is wrong, good and bad. They appeal to ethical considerations subject to ultimate values, obligations, propriety and principles. Often, although not always, moral framing implies a collective or social identity and references ‘us’ and ‘them’ to bring attention to the threat others pose to the group or society more generally. But perhaps most importantly, moral frames offer an ‘absolutist advantage’ by invoking ‘sacred values’ (see Marietta 2009).

The subsequent analysis identifies key themes advanced by conservative evangelical leaders in the ‘Resisting the Green Dragon’ series. We find that these framing efforts center on countering scientific claims about environmental degradation and advancing moral claims about how Christians ought to engage with the environment and environmentalism. In particular, we find that a religious interpretation of the environment is promoted which links to a set of ethical considerations salient among evangelicals in ways that counter the necessity for actions advocated for by creation care and, we believe, attempts to align a religious form of laissez-faire environmentalism with core evangelical beliefs to gain an ‘absolutist advantage.’

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES

This study used qualitative document analysis (QDA) to describe and identify core themes in interpretations of the environment advanced in the series. QDA, developed by David Altheide and colleagues, is defined as ethnographic method and research orientation based on reflexive methodology that focuses on thematic emphasis and trends in communication patterns and discourse rather than on quantity or numerical relationships (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, and Schneider et al, 2008: 128). As with all ethnographic research, the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in modes of information exchange, format, and style (Altheide, 1996:16). What distinguishes QDA from ethnographic research

more broadly is a focus on documents which serve as a symbolic representation of the community being studied (see Atheide et al 2008; Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, and Schneider, 2008:134-135). The aim is to analyze how actions and events are placed in context and how the themes, frames, and discourses that are being presented to assess both explicit and implicit messaging.

The primary source of data collected was a lecture series sponsored by the Cornwall Alliance. The series, entitled *Resisting the Green Dragon*, includes twelve 30-minute lectures with supporting commentaries by prominent theologians, academics, policy leaders and religious elites. We analyze this series and its supporting text documents for several reasons. First, the Cornwall Alliance has been recognized as perhaps the most prominent evangelical organization advancing a conservative approach to the environment, and as such, the group has successfully generated substantial media and public attention (Wilkinson, 2012; Hickman, 2011; Rudolph, 2011). Second, the *Resisting the Green Dragon* series features key influential leaders from nationally recognized Christian and conservative organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, Family Resource Council, Focus on the Family, Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute (see Table 4 below for a list of participants). Lastly, the individuals included in the series are long-term supporters of the Cornwall Alliance and actively engaged in promoting a more conservative, religious-based agenda towards the environment. Taken together, the *Resisting the Green Dragon* lecture series presents a representative document of a prominent discursive frame used by of elite evangelicals promoting a conservative orientation toward environmental policy.

Table 2: *Resisting the Green Dragon* Speakers and Affiliations

Speaker	Affiliation
David Barton	Founder, WallBuilders
Dr. E. Calvin Beisner	President, Cornwall Alliance
Hon. Becky Norton Dunlop	VP of External Relations, The Heritage Foundation
Dr. Michael Farris	Founder, Home School Legal Defense Fund & Patrick Henry College
Bryan Fischer	Director of Issues Analysis, American Family Association
Dr. Steven Hayward	Fellow, American Enterprise Institute
Pastor Jack Hibbs	Calvary Chapel Chino Hills
Bishop Harry Jackson	Hope Christian Church, Beltsville, MD
Dr. Peter Jones	Founder, TruthXchange
Dr. Richard Land	Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention
Dr. David Legates	Professor, Dept. of Geography, University of Delaware
Dr. Vishal Mangalwadi	Speaker, Writer & Philosopher
Tom Minnery	President & CEO, CitizenLink, public policy branch of Focus on the Family
Dr. David Noebel	Former Director and Founder, Summit Ministries
Janet Parshall	National Radio Host, member National Religious Broadcasters
Tony Perkins	President, Family Research Council
Dr. James Tonkowich	Scholar, Institute on Religion and Democracy & Fellow, Cornwall Alliance
Dr. Frank Wright	President & CEO, National Religious Broadcasters
Wendy Wright	Former President, Concerned Women for America
Dr. Charmaine Yoest	President & CEO, Americans United for Life

Each lecture was viewed in its entirety three separate times. The first viewing (November-December 2012) focused on open coding to delimit the data and identify primary themes. Each lecture was then transcribed and viewed a second time (January-March 2013). In this stage, identified themes were tracked across different speakers to compare and contrast key differences and further develop comprehensive constructs of the boundaries and themes identified in the first round. The lectures and transcripts were then reviewed for a third time (April-September 2013) to isolate key representative statements and principals. Coding and conceptual memoing of the series was performed by each of the three researchers to organize the varied elements of each sponsors' arguments. Initial coding and identification of key themes was initially done independently. Prior to the third viewing, the researchers compared findings. A key theme had to be identified by at least two of the three researchers to be included in the findings. Although non-probability sampling disallows for inferences to the general

population, the results provide a robust description of key themes prominent in interpretations of the environment advanced by conservative evangelical elites. These four themes are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Environmentalism is Not Science

Throughout the series, speakers questioned the science upon which environmental concerns are based. This questioning focused largely on three points: doubts about the accuracy of scientific predictions, claims of biased agenda, and God's design of a resilient earth. The argument against environmental science generally, and climate science more directly, centers on illustrating how scientific predictions are inaccurate or misrepresent the truth. From climate models that project increases in temperature 'well above what has been observed', to the statement that CO₂ is good for trees and crops, presenters in the series cast doubt on the accuracy of environmental science. For example, Legates, a well-known 'climate contrarian' and professor of geography at the University of Delaware, uses numerous graphs and tables to argue that scientists overestimate increasing temperatures and increases in hurricane activity, noting that, "*empirical observation undermines the claims of catastrophic consequences from human-induced warming and suggests that warming will be minor and probably more beneficial than harmful.*" Hayward, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, similarly observes:

[Environmentalists'] grasp of the facts is often defective. They often grasp for facts that are often untrue or incomplete or draw the wrong conclusions from the facts. So, for example, a lot of the predictions, 'we're running out of food, we're running out of oil,' represent simple straight-line fallacies of projecting current trends off into the future. But things never stand still, things are always changing.

Doubt is cast not only on the claims environmental scientists make, but also on the reasons for making these claims. Several speakers allege that environmental science has been co-opted and is being used as a tool for political mobilization and persuasion. "*It's a political campaign, but it's not science*" contends Minnery, President & CEO of CitizenLink, a public policy branch of Focus on the Family. In

claiming that environmental science has a political agenda, a number of presenters make a distinction between “normal” science and “post-normal” science to distinguish between what ‘real’ scientists do versus what environmentalist scientists do. “Normal” science is “*science as you and I probably learned*” (Legates); ‘post-normal’ science is driven by an agenda other than truth. “*When we think about science, we think about the truth. Yet in so-called Global Warming Science, we’ve gotten a lot less than the truth many times*” (Minnery). Echoing this outlook, Legates observes that for environmental scientists:

Science is there as a means to an end, and that’s the problem we run into... That’s what the whole goal was... to change our way of looking at science. It’s no longer looking at [the] real world and looking at facts, it’s to get you to act... Science no longer represents directly the facts, science is there as a means to an end.

It is important to note that ‘good’ science – defined in the series as science focused on uncovering the truth – is celebrated by contributors in the series as it is seen as an expression of a God-given capacity for problem solving and reason. Tonkowich, a fellow at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, observes, “*The universe can be known and understood rationally and we human beings, who are made in the image of a rational God, can make discoveries using our reason.*” Yet because environmental science is considered to be biased by a political agenda, speakers argued that it cannot uncover truth.

Commentators in the series further refuted concerns advanced by environmental scientists by arguing that even *if* environmental issues existed or were to emerge, there is little cause for concern because God is in control and designed a resilient earth that cannot be damaged beyond repair.

The Bible is very clear that God is in control of the world—that we can do damage to the world—but God is in control, God is sovereign. The notion that there is catastrophe and the whole thing is going to fall apart, that it will be destroyed by flood again as the ice caps melt; God makes it very clear, he sets the bounds of the sea. (Tonkowich)

God has not given us an earth that is so delicately balanced, that if we make one mistake with it we wind up with a fireball or an iceball. That's not the way the climate system operates.

(Legates)

Taken together, the message that emerges is that the science that informs current environmental concerns and predictions is a questionable 'post-normal' science driven by a political agenda. Additionally, environmental concerns about the well-being of the earth should be tempered as the universe functions according to God's plan and God did not give humans a fragile earth. This message plays an important role in counterframing claims made by more pro-environmental movements as it generates uncertainty about the seriousness of environmental issues and the true aims of environmental scientists. Moreover, it implies that Christians who have concerns about the earth's well-being lack sufficient faith because they do not trust enough in God's design.

Theme 2: Environmentalism is a Religion

The theme that environmental science is 'bad' science sets the stage for a second major theme: environmentalism is a form of religion. Hayward observes that *"the big problem for people of faith is that environmentalism is a secular religion, [and] in fact it can be understood of as a Christian heresy."*

This point is reinforced by David Barton, founder of WallBuilders, who observes that:

People say that environmentalism is a religion, others say 'oh no, that isn't true,' but it really is. Now, how do we know? Well, I've been involved with seven cases in the Supreme Court and I can point to a number of court decisions where the court has said, 'religion is whatever you believe so strongly that it affects the way you live your life.' That's why the court recognizes even atheism as a religion.... And environmentalism definitely is a religion. It has its own high priests, it has folks that tell us what we can and can't do with the environment and how we can treat it and they're the guardians of it as if it's a great temple. It's a religion. And as soon as we recognize that environmentalism is a religion then it helps us to understand how to respond

to what is said, how to filter what is said, and say, 'now wait a minute, that's not science, that's your faith position that you're taking.

The above quote reflects a more general pattern observed in the series of removing environmentalism from the realm of scientific reason and placing it in the realm of faith. Speakers contributed to this theme by specifying various ways in which environmentalism parallels a religion.

Salvation is found in eating the right food – organic, locally grown, probably vegetarian – recycling, buying the right sorts of light bulbs, driving the right sorts of cars. These rather than faith in Christ are the path to spiritual wholeness. (Tonkowich)

[It] offers its own doctrines of God, of creation of humanity, of sin and of redemption. (Beisner)

These characterizations aid in defining environmentalism as a religion instead of an objective, credible science, but also imply that evangelicals who engage with more pro-environmental movements, such as creation care, are potentially falling prey to a competing, blasphemous, religious mindset. This framing raises moral concerns because, as McCamack points out (2007:649), an attempt to worship anything other than God, including the environment, is considered antithetical to scriptural teachings.

Theme 3: Environmentalism is a Threat to Christianity

The theme that environmentalism is itself a form of religion directly links to the third major theme observed in our analyses: environmentalism is a direct threat to Christianity. Almost all of the speakers elaborated on the ways they see environmentalism challenging core ethical considerations salient to evangelicals. These considerations centered mainly on three sub-themes: (1) preserving the creator/creation distinction, (2) valuing human life, and (3) caring for the poor.

Creator over creation.

Many speakers in the series argue that environmentalism threatens Christianity because it inverts the fundamental tenet of a God-ordained hierarchy in which the creator is sovereign over creation. In

this hierarchy, God is above all, humans are next as God's most beloved creation, followed by nature.

Dunlap, VP of External Relations for the Heritage Foundation, comments:

I think it is very important of us not to forget is that man is created in God's image. A man was the final creation activity that the Lord God engaged in on this Earth. He created man and he put man in charge of the planet that he'd created and all the resources. We are not like the rest of nature. We are the most important, valuable and precious resource that God created.

Environmentalism is seen to either reverse the hierarchy by putting nature above God and man, claim that all three are equal, or eliminate God altogether. These revisions are seen as threats to Christianity because they challenge a core belief in God's sovereignty and the 'special position' of humans as above and distinct from nature.

God created human beings and he created the Earth for their habitation. (Land)

Mankind is the apex of creation; He placed it over the planet [puts right hand on top of left hand, covering it], over the environment. (Barton)

This subtheme connects to a key tenet expressed by Paul of Tarsus in his Epistle to the Romans (Rom:1:25, NRSV) in which Paul observes that God abandoned those who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator." By focusing on the earth and inverting the hierarchy, environmentalism runs the risk of worshipping creation, not the Creator, which is considered among evangelicals to be a form of 'heresy' of the worst kind (Zaleha and Szasz, 2014:210).

Valuing Human Life.

Several speakers allege that through such inversions, environmentalism fundamentally devalues human life to a level equal to or below nature. This is argued to go against God's design and mandate in which humans are considered God's special creation. Instead of recognizing the privileged position of humans, Wright, President & CEO, National Religious Broadcasters, contends that environmentalists:

Don't see humans as the Bible, as God sees them; that human beings are made in the image of God, and they have dignity, they have worth, they have the right to life.

Dunlop echoes this point, observing that environmentalists see humans as part of the problem, not the solution. Whether it is through having too many children, or considering humans as pollution and counting children as carbon footprints, environmentalism is argued to systematically deny value to human life. Yoest, President & CEO of Americans United for Life, for example, creates a dichotomy between environmentalism and Evangelical Christianity in which people can be considered '*parasites or possibilities,*' yet, she contends, "*the fundamental challenge underlying the whole message of environmentalism is that somehow people are bad.*" Additionally, environmentalism is perceived to view human life as disastrous for the health of the planet and through this mindset encourages policies that devalue humans. This degradation is argued to be manifest in policies that restrict the use of natural resources that were placed on earth for the betterment of humankind. Consequently restricting their use is claimed to be incompatible with Christianity, because it robs people of their dignity and limits their full potential.

Caring for the -poor.

The assertion that environmentalism condemns rather than celebrates human life is linked to a third morally salient line of reasoning: environmental policies hurt the poor. Environmental policies are considered destructive to the poor because they thwart economic growth. Resources should be used to help the poor instead of hurting the poor, and continues Dunlop, "*no environmental policy is a good environmental policy unless it's good for people.*" Moreover, such policies end up hurting the environment because, as Beisner, President of the Cornwall Alliance, contends, concern for as well as the capacity to care for the environment results *from* economic development:

What's really tragic is that much of today's environmental movement actually promotes policies that are destructive to the poor, which means in practice, that often we at the Cornwall Alliance find ourselves at odds with environmental advocacy organizations because they promote

policies that slow economic development, that make energy prices rise, that deprive the poor of their access to the resources of the earth. They will even tell us that economic development itself is a danger to the environment. Whereas in reality what we actually learn is that economic development is the very best friend of the environment because when you are worried about putting food on the table, and clothes on the back, and a roof over the head frankly you don't care much about Ozone depletion, and chemical runoff from agricultural fields into the streams, or global warming, or anything like that. You have other things, pressing matters, that concern you this very moment and you cannot think about those other matters. And even if you could think about them you certainly couldn't do anything significant about them; you don't have the resources to do anything about them. And so a strong, vibrant, growing economy is not an enemy of the environment, it is instead, its best friend.

The position that natural resources need to be used to help the poor, frequently expressed by the phrase 'wealthier is healthier,' was further expressed by Dunlop: "how do we engage in activities that allow people to become wealthier so they can have access to technology which will allow them to become healthier?" This idea is coupled with the moral argument that it is unfair that developed nations should be able to have access to the benefits of extensive resource use and development – a situation Bishop Jackson compares to a form of oppression.

We are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves and our neighbors are our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia, and South America and we should not stop our neighbors from having the resources and the benefits of the resources, electricity, things like this that environmentalists would just prefer that other people in other parts of the world just not have. (Dunlap)

Taken together, these three sub-themes highlight how environmentalism is seen in the series to threaten core values relevant to evangelicals. The environment and environmental policy are defined as moral issues and directly linked to core ethical considerations salient among evangelicals in ways that counter the nature of and necessity for actions advocated for by the 'creation care' movement.

Theme 4: Environmentalism is a Threat to Personal and Political Freedom

The final theme defines environmentalism as the harbinger of a system of global governance. Several of the speakers in the RGD series declare that the environmental movement is a threat to freedom; the “Green Dragon” desires total control. Total control refers not just to creating environmental regulations, but also to control over the economy and people, more generally. The following quotes are illustrative:

The great threat is a worldview threat that then moves out from being a worldview threat to being a threat to economics, a threat to the poor, a threat to the human race... I think the fear mongering is simply a way of obtaining power. Whoever controls the environmental regulations controls the economy, controls the population. (Tonkowich)

The political agenda is: expand control over people and resources. In common speech we'd say, that's bigger government. But nowadays it's not just bigger government on the national scale, but on the global scale. (Hayward)

Al Gore, in his book “Earth in the Balance,” published in 1992, said that preventing global warming should be the new central organizing principle of human civilization. Gore, himself, after the passage last summer of the Waxman-Markey Cap and Trade bill in the House, told a gathering in London, that the bill's passage was a helpful move toward, “global governance.” Al Gore understands what he's seeking here. Or think about the European Union president, Herman Van Rompuy, at the UN General Assembly on November 22 of last year, who said... “the climate conference at Copenhagen is another step towards the global management of our planet.” (Beisner)

‘Global management of the planet’ is seen as a form of totalitarianism and a number of speakers argued that certain actors have a desire to control the world and are using the vehicle of environmentalism to gain power in all aspects of life. This is viewed as a direct threat to the autonomy

of each individual and family as well as to control of life, reason, freedom of religion, and basic prosperity. The following quotes are illustrative:

Alas, riding on the shoulders of genuine concern for the health of the planet, is an agenda of radical proportions, the agenda of the Green Dragon. That signals the end of the nation-state, the mothballing of the US constitution, the dismissal of representative government, the normalization of all sexual and religious choices, the illumination of the transcendent God of biblical theism, the explicit rejection of Christ, and the demonization and scapegoating of all those who would beg to differ. (Jones)

The Green Movement threatens liberty because it wants to use government to control every aspect of our lives. It wants to remake the whole of life, in public and in private, in personal life, and in family life, and business life and government life. (Beisner)

The great threat is a worldview threat that then moves out from being a worldview threat to being a threat to economics, a threat to the poor, a threat to the human race. (Tonkovich)

This reframing of the perceived sinister motivations of the environmental movement connects back with the underlying agenda of the “bad science” environmentalists engage in. The agenda, the story goes, is one of global governance in which Christians no longer have the rights and freedoms to believe and raise their families as they see fit. This threat is meant to draw evangelicals closer together and to engage in the moral fight through a correct version of a theology of the environment.

As a whole, these four interrelated themes – environmentalism is not science, but a religion, which threatens Christianity, and personal and political freedom – attempt to create a cohesive theology of the environment for evangelical Christians which counters the moral and scientific claims of the environmental movement. The choice of “Green Dragon” in the series title is not an arbitrary one. It explicitly parallels the story of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The cautionary tale links environmentalism to the same threat the serpent posed but in this case, the implication is that Christians

are being tempted by environmentalism – a crafty green dragon – without being conscious of the ultimate consequences it poses to their relationship with God.

Around the world environmentalism has become a radical movement, something we call the Green Dragon, and it is deadly, deadly to human prosperity, deadly to human life, deadly to human freedom, and deadly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Make no mistake about it, environmentalism is no longer your friend, it is your enemy. And the battle is not primarily political or material, it is spiritual... The apostle James wrote, “resist the devil and he will flee you.” In the face of the Green Dragon we need a whole generation of Dragon slayers. (Parshall)

DISCUSSION

Fischer (2003:56) observes that “the social meaning upon which political discourses turn is mainly derived from moral or ideological positions that establish and govern competing views of the good society.” Basic to the politics of policymaking, she argues, “must be an understanding of the discursive struggle to create and control systems of shared social meanings” (Fischer, 2003:13). In this paper, we explore this discursive struggle as it relates to the environment by attending to the ways in which this issue is framed and contested among elite evangelicals promoting a conservative orientation toward environmentalism.

We identify four key interrelated themes used in the discursive frame advanced by evangelical leaders as they promote religious interpretations of the environment distinct from more pro-environmental factions. These include: (1) environmentalism is not science, (2) but a religion, (3) that threatens Christianity, and (4) personal and political freedom. The four themes focus on denying or neutralizing scientific claims of environmental degradation but also, and perhaps more importantly, countering moral claims advanced by advocates of creation care by linking a religious form of laissez-faire environmentalism to ethical considerations salient among evangelicals.

Efforts to counter scientific claims centered largely on the social construction of ‘non-problematicity’ (Freudenberg 2000) by questioning the validity of scientific findings or the agenda of environmentalists within the scientific community. Furthermore, it is argued that even if environmental changes are taking place, God is ultimately in control and did not design a fragile earth. The implicit message is that those who believe that production and growth is destructive to the natural world do not have sufficient faith in God’s design. In short, the well-being of the environment is a matter of faith, not policy.

Efforts to counter moral claims further positioned environmentalism as a form of religion ‘incompatible’ with and threatening to Christianity. This threat was conceptualized in a number of ways. First, environmentalism was seen to conflate the Creator/Creation distinction by placing nature above humankind or by claiming that God, humankind, and nature are equal. Second, environmentalism was positioned as ‘anti-life’ in advocating population control and defining people as ‘parasites’ instead of ‘possibilities’. Third, environmentalism was argued to threaten Christianity because it rejects a Christian mandate to help the poor. This latter assertion was based on the argument that ‘wealthier is healthier,’ but that environmental policies slow economic growth and, therefore, are harmful to poorer populations. Ultimately, it is argued that environmentalism robs humans of their dignity and thereby insults God. These sub-themes are germane not simply because they shape and express conservative orientations to the environment, but because they raise a set of ethical considerations highly salient to evangelicals. In reframing environmentalism as a religion which (1) places creation over Creator, (2) advances an anti-life agenda, and (3) promotes policies that hurt the poor, conservative evangelical elites counter and recompose moral claims advanced by advocates of creation care.

The final theme extends the threat of environmentalism to personal and political freedom – environmentalism not only threatens Christianity, it threatens everyone. This assertion ties into broader concerns about global governance common among many conservatives, religious and non-religious alike. In this sense, environmentalism is likened to a serpent (a green dragon) which conceals a

subversive agenda to control the economy and limit personal freedom while displacing Christians' relationship with God. This theme counters creation care by suggesting that its advocates are ultimately being duped while calling on evangelicals to engage in the moral fight through the correct version of a theology of the environment.

The findings reported here are important for understanding responses to the environment among evangelicals, as well as the broader set of meanings and ethical considerations in which the environment is embedded. By promoting a religious interpretation of the environment which links to ethical considerations salient among evangelicals, elites in the series attempt to gain 'absolutist advantage' by triggering the belief that evangelicals must sacrifice deeply held principles to support more pro-environmental practices. We cannot say if and how their constituents adopt these cues based on the research presented here. Nevertheless, it is likely the frames advanced used shape the range of interpretive possibilities used to make sense of environmental issues insofar as they define whether and why the environmental issues are important, how they need to be understood and the ways in which they can and should be resolved (see Steinberg 1998).

Debates between 'pro' and 'anti' environmental movements among Christians are often defined as a conflict between a 'stewardship' versus 'dominionist' approach to the environment. We believe this dichotomy oversimplifies the moral challenges evangelicals confront in determining how faith should inform attitudes and behaviors towards the environment, particularly as the term 'stewardship' is used to define efforts on both sides of the debate. The point of contention has more to do with the form stewardship should take than whether or not one should be a 'good steward'. Creation care defines good stewardship as protecting the garden for present and future generations by 'stopping and preventing activities' that are harmful to it. For conservatives, however, good stewardship entails active use of resources to serve others. Legates, a signer of the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, draws on the parable of the talents in defining this form of stewardship:

Think about talents not as money, but... as resources... We've been given a lot of resources in the world, we are not to simply protect them from [ever] being used ... we are to use our resources wisely, we're to be conservative, but at the same time we want to be able to use our resources to be able to explain to people the gospel and to save them from situations that will be humanly detrimental.

If a dichotomy is to be made, we believe a more suitable one exists between those promoting a religious form of laissez-faire environmentalism and those calling for more active conservation and protection of environment resources. The latter, advocated by creation care, calls upon evangelicals to 'work vigorously' to protect and heal the environment and to stop and prevent activities harmful to creation. Emphasis is placed on the need for active intervention to limit and even correct the course of environmental degradation as 'these degradations are signs that we are pressing against the finite limits God has set for creation' (Evangelical Environmental Network, 2011). In contrast, laissez-faire environmentalism emphasizes that God is in control and designed the earth not as a fragile ecosystem, but to be 'robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting' (Cornwall Alliance, 2009) system while also endowing humankind with the capacity to solve problems, including those related to the environment. Both sides emphasize that humanity, through sin (e.g. greed, pride, laziness), can and does negatively impact the environment; however, for advocates of laissez faire environmentalism, efforts to intervene through conservation and protectionism often result in 'negative consequences' ultimately harmful to humankind. Greater emphasis is placed instead on 'wise' and productive use of resources coupled with a faith in God's design, a design that is interpreted as creating and ordering nature for a purpose that is good.

In exploring religious attitudes towards climate change, Wardekker et al (2009: 513) observe that:

Complex and uncertain issues such as climate change raise many questions with strong moral and ethical dimensions that are important to address in climate-policy formation and international negotiations... Such issues cannot be solved by simply calculating an 'optimal

solution'... Rather, they invoke fundamental questions on how we ought to live and how humans should value and relate to each other and non-human nature.

Definitions of and answers to such fundamental questions constitute the discursive field in which competing theological interpretations of the environment as a moral issue emerge. It is within this field that public understanding of the 'problem of the environment' and responses to this problem among evangelicals may be constructed. We do not suggest that secular politics plays no role in shaping responses to these questions (see Brulle, 2013). We recognize that short-term economic interests correspond more with laissez-faire environmentalism than they do with creation care and that these interests can and do co-opt religious discourse. Nevertheless, it is myopic to think that moral interpretations of the environment, including those among supporters of the Cornwall Alliance, are limited to these interests. Lakoff (2010:73) appeals to environmentalists to understand the frames and broader system in which they are connected because facts about environmental degradation 'must make sense in terms of their system of frames, or they will be ignored'. Hoffman (2011:20) likewise contends that resolution of environmental problems requires a more integrative shift in which the focus of discussion moves away from political positions toward addressing underlying moral reasoning and values that are at play (see also Nisbit, 2009; Gardiner, 2011; Feinberg and Willer, 2013). This shift is particularly important given that apprehending the problem of the environment is not simply about understanding the science (and, in fact, may have little to do with scientific facts), but is related to broader moral orders in which the relationships between God, nature, and humankind are defined. Insofar as broad-based action is needed to address growing environmental concerns, the ability to generate dialogue and involvement across stakeholders depends, in part, on the ability to effectively communicate by engaging with the values and meaning systems that shape different orientations towards the environment.

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