

Eco-theology in the news?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 21, 2012

The [new Century editorial](#) offers that if the Republicans nominate Rick Santorum for president, his regular rhetoric about poverty might challenge President Obama to engage him on it--giving voters a chance to hear two different analyses of the problem instead of, you know, not hearing about it all.

Somewhat more quixotically, I've found myself wondering whether there's an opportunity as well in Santorum's [recent claim](#) that environmentalism amounts to a "phony theology." Stephen Prothero's [reaction](#) is to challenge Santorum's desire to draw who's-a-real-Christian lines; [Rachel Tabachnick's](#) is to trace the "phony theology" line to the influence of the [Cornwall Alliance](#).

Good points both, but what interests me here is that Santorum's comments point to one of the basic theological questions for Christian eco-engagement: Is the emphasis on human membership in the wider creation or on human responsibility for it?

It's telling that Santorum--[pro-coal](#), [climate-change-denying](#) Rick Santorum--didn't say that people should "subdue" the earth or "have dominion" over it, language (yes, biblical) that tends to conjure up mindless degradation. Instead, we should "husband [the earth's] resources and [be] good stewards of the earth." Never mind that Santorum has rarely met an environmental protection he liked; the business-first crowd can apparently husband/steward the earth by pursuing a bunch of other policies they already favored anyway, and then watching the goodness trickle down from the steward to the stewarded. (The Cornwall Alliance's "[Stewardship Agenda](#)" begins with promoting political and economic freedom, refocusing efforts away from "wildly exaggerated claims about climate change" and encouraging population growth.)

Terms like "stewardship" are pliable to the point of being almost useless. By insisting that we stick with language that maintains the human as subject and the earth as otherized object, Santorum offered a case in point of its inadequacy for those of us who *do* favor pro-environment policy. Yet even among us, terms like "stewardship"

and "creation care" persist. We may be a long way off from widespread use of language reflecting that the creation isn't (or isn't just) *under* us; it *is* us.

So it'd be amazing to hear Obama respond to Santorum by [quoting Wendell Berry](#) on "that idiotic term 'the environment,' which refers to a world that surrounds us but is presumably different from us and distant from us." Or maybe the president could continue in his habit of [talking about interdependence](#) but shift its meaning in an eco-theological direction. Personally I'd be thrilled if he proposed that students of systematic theology really ought to examine human anthropology and creation as a single unit, not two separate ones.

Failing this--and yes, I know that failure is inevitable here--it'd be nice if Obama would at least reverse his support for [fracking](#). What's the worst the Republicans can do? [Reiterate](#) that he's a pawn of "radical environmentalists"? Would that it were true.