

The historical roots of evangelical anti-environmentalism

By [Mark Stoll](#)

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The anticipated publication on Thursday of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, has American conservative Protestants up in arms. Firmly grounded in Catholic teachings on social justice, the encyclical is the culmination of half a century of Catholic thinking on the environment. Why then do American conservative evangelicals so adamantly oppose environmentalism?

Since the environmental movement's peak in the 1970s, evangelicals have pilloried environmentalists and cast doubt on problems like global warming. The Southern Baptist Convention's [2004 statement](#) on "Environmentalism and Evangelicals" is typical:

Whereas, Some in our culture have completely rejected God the Father in favor of deifying "Mother Earth," made environmentalism into a neo-pagan religion, and elevated animal and plant life to the place of equal—or greater—value with human life; and

Whereas, The scientific community is divided on the effects of mankind's impact on the environment; . . .

RESOLVED, That we resist alliances with extreme environmental groups whose positions contradict biblical principles (2 Chronicles 19:2) and that we oppose solutions based on questionable science, which bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily restrict economic development, resulting in less economic opportunity for our poorest citizens.

There is nothing inherently biblical about anti-environmentalism. Why then this hostility? Part of the reason is theological, and part historical.

Theologically, evangelicalism has accentuated the role of individuals. Evangelicals emphasized the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20) to preach salvation to all, who must each personally experience God's grace and accept Christ. They rejected

state-supported churches in favor of voluntary churches of the saved. Colonial persecution and oppression of Baptists confirmed their resentment against active government roles in religion. Evangelicalism swept the South in the early 19th century only when it acceded (tacitly at first, then openly) to existing social and economic institutions. Then, this meant defending slavery; today, it means championing social and economic individualism and weak government. Reluctant reformers, evangelicals insist that only conversion of every individual will solve the nation's social, economic, and environmental problems. Government's main role is to get out of religion's way.

People raised in evangelical households generally retain this preference for individual solutions and aversion to government ones. Examples include nature writer John Burroughs and prizewinning biologist E. O. Wilson, important contributors to environmental thought who were raised Baptist, who have avoided politics and advocated individualistic solutions akin to evangelism and conversion. Wilson thinks each individual has an innate love of life, "biophilia," which, awakened, should lead to preservation of biodiversity and other environmental solutions. Environmentalists' demands for strong government action have made an environmental skeptic of Baptist author Gregg Easterbook and an outright opponent of [Dixy Lee Ray](#), former chairwoman of the Atomic Energy Commission.

Historically, evangelical anti-environmentalism first appeared in the 1970s, after historian Lynn White, Jr., published "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis." This classic 1967 essay claimed that Christianity, by commanding humans to conquer and dominate the earth, fostered a mentality that created the environmental crisis. White's essay prompted soul-searching in mainline Protestant churches. A "greening" of theology ensued. [Earth Care Congregations](#) and similar stewardship movements have grown popular.

However, the idea that Christianity has been antithetical to environmentalism also inspired many to seek greener spirituality in Eastern and indigenous religions. Neopaganism and earth-centered spiritual thought grew popular. Evangelicals recoiled from environmentalism and charged that environmentalists worshipped creation rather than the Creator. In the late 1970s they seized on the notion of the "culture wars" and lumped environmentalism together with abortion, feminism, gay and lesbian people's rights, and secular humanism as contrary to Christianity. Hostile to environmentalism ever since, evangelicals cast even the solid science on global warming as a conspiracy against freedom and faith promulgated in schools and

universities.

In the last two decades a small evangelical environmental movement has emerged. As the culture wars of the 1970s recede in memory, younger evangelicals have grown more open, among them Jonathan Merritt, author of *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet* and the son of a former moderator of the SBC. *Laudato Si'* will surely accelerate this trend. Even evangelical environmentalists, though, remain suspicious of solutions that require significant government action. As the dominant force in contemporary American Protestantism, evangelicals and their children will surely act as a brake on environmental policy for a long time to come.

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