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# Conservation Theology for Conservation Biologists—a Reply to David Orr

As an international group of Christians from five continents who are also professionals in a variety of conservation-related disciplines, we write this response to David Orr's recent essay "Armageddon versus Extinction" (Orr 2005). Although we agree there are some elements of truth in Orr's essay, three aspects of his argument significantly disappoint us. First, we think he seriously misunderstands the nature of science and the nature of religion. Second, his understanding of the connection between "evangelicals" and "right-wing conservatives" seems to be based on an ill-informed understanding of what evangelicals believe, so we aim to clarify this. Third, we are deeply concerned that by generalizing to such an extent and then calling for confrontation, Orr will only fuel a conflict that will be damaging to conservation in the long term, when instead much could be gained by both parties from constructive engagement (as his essay hints at, but then shoots down).

Although we are disappointed by these three aspects of Orr's essay, and expand on these points below, we also want to make it clear that we are not rejecting his argument wholesale: it is unfortunately true that evangelical Christians have often been sluggish about caring for what they believe to be a world entrusted to human care by a loving God. We are greatly saddened by this reality, although as John Cobb (2005) pointed out in his thoughtful

response to Orr's essay, among the broader Christian community, evangelicals have often been *ahead* of other Christian traditions in "protecting declining species" and "respecting the integrity of creation." In reality people associated with all religious and secular communities have contributed to the long history of environmental destruction, and most of us are living unsustainably. Our aim here, however, is not to exempt evangelicals from the charge of neglecting their responsibility to care for God's world.

We write this response therefore in an attempt to seek constructive engagement and to explain where and why we disagree with Orr's approach. Space does not permit us to demonstrate fully that the popular view of evangelicals as obsessed with Armageddon, and hence opposed to conservation, is ill informed and overly simplistic.

First, regarding Orr's philosophy of science, he points out that conservation biologists "lack both a deep explanation of what ails us and a larger cosmology that resonates with the public" but wonders "whether the sciences can come together to tell a compelling, authentic, and life-orienting story of our human sojourn." We suggest that he is hoping for the sciences to deliver something that, by definition, they can never achieve. Science, on its own, cannot fulfill human aspirations and dreams. Science is about discovering the whats and the hows of the

universe and does not address the deeper why questions relating purpose and meaning in life.

Scientific method, valuable as it is (and most of us are scientists), is surely not the only way in which we gain knowledge. People in their daily lives employ other disciplines to gain understanding, including the arts, philosophy, and religion. By disparaging religion, and seemingly seeking to move science into its place, we think Orr is trying to make science do something that it can never do. Of course he is not alone in this, and the reduction of conservation to being technical science alone surely contributes hugely to its lack of appeal in certain communities. In a recent influential paper entitled "The Death of Environmentalism" (Shellenberger & Nordhaus 2004), the authors write, "What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to re-think everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical and make proposals that are essentially technical." The far-sighted 1990 Union of Concerned Scientists' *Open Letter to the Religious Community*, signed by 33 leading scientists worldwide, said of the global environmental situation: "Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension." We agree strongly with Rick

Flood's point (Flood 2005) that "the case for sustainability is ultimately a moral one based on a view that life—including the lives of future generations of species—is indeed precious." If the conservation movement is to develop a serious ethic, as we believe it must, then disparaging and confronting religion, or elevating science to fulfill a religious function as Orr proposed in his essay, is the very last thing we must do.

Second, the meaning of *evangelical* is not agreed upon universally. Among the different Christian groupings, we understand the distinctive feature of evangelicalism is its emphasis on the final authority of the Bible as the Word of God written in human language. From this belief, a number of others follow that are often seen as distinctive but that of course are equally believed in part or in whole by adherents of other branches of Christianity. They include an emphasis on redemption through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the need for personal conversion, and the importance of communicating those convictions to wider society. Contrary to Orr's suggestions, however, evangelicals are far from monolithic, and a wide variety of theological differences exist within the evangelical community, almost all of which can be traced back to varying interpretations of the Bible.

Orr employs media terms such as *right-wing evangelicals*, but there is nothing intrinsic to a commitment to biblical authority that requires evangelicals to be right wing (just as it is perfectly possible for secular conservationists not to be left wing). It is true that at present in the United States the great majority of people who call themselves evangelicals are politically conservative. This tendency is much less clear in the rest of the world, however, and even in the United States there are many evangelicals who are politically liberal. In particular, home-grown evangelical movements in the so-called developing countries often face diverse challenges in terms of applying

biblical teaching in their social contexts. One cannot simplify the political standing of such groups to being either right wing or left wing.

Likewise, evangelicals are not united in a belief that the universe as we know it will be destroyed at the end of time. Indeed, many believe that the overall thrust of biblical theology, built on a number of key texts such as Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, is exactly the opposite. The Bible also emphasizes the responsibility of people to care for everything that God has made, for example, in Genesis 2:15. Orr's view of evangelicals as a community longing for the destruction of the material world is simply inaccurate, although we recognize the presence of some wilder individuals on the fringes who serve as colorful caricatures for those seeking examples to reinforce their prejudices.

The thing that disturbs us most about Orr's essay is his call for confrontation, rather than dialog, with evangelicals. There are four reasons why we believe this would be a serious mistake.

1. Evangelicals form a large and growing community worldwide. Fighting evangelical Christians might alienate them against conservation but will do little to change their beliefs and activities. Such a conflict would probably lead to a dangerous backlash against the environmental movement that could seriously undermine the achievement of important conservation targets. Furthermore, we might see the current antipathy toward conservation from certain evangelical groups in the United States spread to other parts of the world, where currently such hostility is rare.
2. There are many existing efforts that are bringing Christians together with conservationists to work together to protect areas of natural habitat. We should build on these initiatives rather than take the confrontational approach

Orr proposes. Christian conservationists need the support of the wider conservation community in their efforts, not its opposition. Those who work with communities around protected areas know only too well that taking a confrontational approach over any issue does not lead to support for conservation.

3. Christians have networks that spread throughout communities across the world and have the potential to be able to spread a joint message about the care for all of God's world far more effectively than the small number of conservation biologists can hope to. We should work with evangelical Christians to develop this message and spread it, rather than fight them.
4. Perhaps of greatest importance are the resources that authentically Christian theology can bring to an otherwise bleak environmental situation by establishing the grounds for hope. By this we mean something more than simply the belief that at the end of time God will restore his creation and that the loss of the dodo from Mauritius and the golden toad from the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica is therefore not the end of the story. Of course this future hope is an important one, but when we say "grounds for hope," we are referring to our present situation as well. Evangelical Christians are committed by their biblical beliefs not only to the conviction that God himself cares for his universe in a daily and ongoing way but also that he helps and guides people in their conservation efforts. We are therefore not on our own against the relentless forces of unsustainable development and rapacious materialism. Every time we celebrate a conservation success story such as the recovery of the white rhinoceros in southern Africa, we are strengthened in this present hope that God is working with us to redeem

his creation. Furthermore, these present successes are a very real foretaste of even greater things to come on that day when God will fully restore all that He has made.

The recently released results of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (see <http://www.millennium-assessment.org>) strongly bear out Orr's contention that the world is "going to hell in the proverbial handbasket." There is little basis, it seems, for hope. A quote from the *Economist* (18 December 2004) captures this well: "The modern environmental movement appears to have borrowed only half of the apocalyptic narrative (i.e., the downside). There is a Garden of Eden (unspoiled nature), a fall (economic development), the usual moral degeneracy (it's all man's fault), and the pressing sense that the world is enjoying its final days (time is running out: please donate now!). So far, however, the green lobby does not appear to have realized it is missing the standard happy ending. Perhaps, until it does, environmentalism is destined to remain in the political margins. Everyone needs redemption."

Christian theology can provide the conservation movement not only with the basis for much-needed hope, but it can provide the promise of the presence of the Creator God working with us in our seemingly weak and inadequate conservation efforts. It is perhaps time for secular conservationists to learn from those they seem to fear the most.

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