

## Greener Than Thou: The American Left Takes Up Christian Environmentalism

By Patrick Reilly

*Summary: Religious green groups are distorting the tenets of Christianity in order to pressure church congregations to go along with the Big Government environmentalist agenda. It's the height of cynicism and an opportunistic attack on capitalism that plays on the emotions of the nation's churchgoers while cashing in on the popularity of some green initiatives.*

What would Jesus drive?

It's a silly question. The Bible recounts Jesus astride a donkey and in a fishing boat, but he never really "drove" anything, unless the popular country song "Jesus, Take the Wheel" has any historical relevance.

What Jesus did was walk—and one can only assume that's what the "greener than thou" environmentalists at the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) would like the rest of us to be doing. Want proof? Try carting a group of elderly faithful to one of EEN's prayer events in a Chevy Blazer.

"What would Jesus drive?" is the slogan of the Christian environmentalists' national campaign against sport utility vehicles (SUVs). EEN claims a "growing religious consensus that fuel economy and pollution from cars, trucks and SUVs are serious moral issues."

EEN is not a church-sponsored entity in itself, but an independent organization that urges churches to integrate the environmentalist agenda within their religious activities. The activist group "seeks to educate, inspire, and mobilize Christians in their effort to care for



**Thou shalt not interfere with Al Gore's money-making crusade: the Regeneration Project produces religious environmentalist propaganda. It produced *Covenant*, a short film (screen grab above) featuring Rev. Sally Bingham, who is "environmental minister" at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.**

God's creation, to be faithful stewards of God's provision, and to advocate for actions and policies that honor God and protect the environment." EEN publishes suggested sermons for church leaders and interprets the Bible in a manner that supports environmentalist political goals.

It is just one example of how environmentalists are getting religion, and some Christians are going green. Not only SUVs—but also climate change, animal welfare, protection of rare plant species, and other "green" concerns—are increasingly the subject of a curious mix of leftist politics and religion, especially Christianity.

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After decades of unsuccessful efforts to root out the “religious right” from American politics, the religious left is striving to compete. Today’s environmentalists are not content to argue science and public policy. Instead they are trying to use religion to advance their cause.

## Greener on the Other Side

Think the White House is spending too much? Not so, according to the “Religious Plea for a Green Stimulus” sponsored by The Regeneration Project of San Francisco.

“When billions of taxpayer dollars are at stake, it is a moral issue. When the planet is in peril, it is a moral issue,” declared Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, an Episcopalian priest and founder and president of The Regeneration Project, upon delivering the “Green Stimulus” petition to President Barack Obama in February.

The petition—which The Regeneration Project claims was signed by unspecified “thousands” of religious leaders—opposes the construction of all new coal-fired plants in America, urges the reduction of “greenhouse gas emissions” by 35% below 1990 levels before 2020, and would increase fuel economy standards for a domestic auto industry that is collapsing.

The Regeneration Project says it represents

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more than 5,000 congregations of various faiths in 29 states. Its primary activity is its “Interfaith Power and Light” (IPL) campaign to halt global warming.

Congregations associated with IPL are currently screening *Fighting Goliath*, a film about what were largely successful grassroots efforts opposing the construction of 19 Texas coal plants in 2007. At the CoolCongregations.com website, IPL offers religious leaders an analysis tool to “calculate your congregation’s carbon footprint.”

IPL works with liberal actor Robert Redford, who narrated *Fighting Goliath*, his Redford Center (a leftist policy center), and documentary film studio Alpheus Media. Redford and his Sundance Institute also collaborate with philanthropist George Soros to produce movies with left-wing messages. (For more on the Redford/Soros moviemaking partnership, see *Foundation Watch*, March 2008.)

Given IPL’s fervency about protecting the atmosphere, one almost expects the group to admonish congregations to whisper their prayers to avoid belting out carbon dioxide in the excitement of a rousing hymn.

Bingham has been at this a long time—25 years by her count—and identifies herself as “one of the first faith leaders to fully recognize global warming as a moral issue.” But she is hardly a lone actor. She serves on the boards of the Environmental Defense Fund and the Environmental Working Group, and she advises the Union of Concerned Scientists. She co-chairs the Commission for the Environment of the Episcopal Diocese of California.

Like the Episcopalian leadership, several Christian churches have embraced environmentalism. The Eco-Justice Program of the National Council of Churches of Christ, for example, works with the faithful to lobby Congress on preserving public lands, reducing carbon emissions and demanding environmental restrictions on builders of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. The Presbyterians for Restoring Creation embrace “God’s call to be green” by opposing drilling in the Artic National Wildlife Refuge, complaining about “dangerous chemicals” in personal care products in California and opposing the privatization of Ghana’s water.

The Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) advocates, among other

things, the end of “environmental racism.” Their argument is that pollution generated by corporations unfairly targets lower class populations. ICCR includes among its sponsors a number of Roman Catholic orders as well as the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The National Religious Partnership for the Environment is perhaps the largest of the religious coalitions, supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches U.S.A., the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life and the Evangelical Environmental Network. Its efforts are largely educational and more mainstream, urging Americans to organize “environmental awareness days,” write letters to the editor about environmental concerns and lobby the United States government “to play a strong international role in researching and preserving biodiversity worldwide.”

Then there are the animal rights groups on the fringe of environmental theology. Incredibly, the performance artists at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) claim support from Jesus Christ for their anti-human agenda: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11-16). Do they really believe that Jesus intended his followers to take up a shepherd’s staff against mutton eaters? PETA doesn’t appear too serious about religious faith. While recommending a workshop for Christians, PETA offers the following disclaimer: “This workshop highlights the *Christian* Biblical imperative for mercy and kindness to animals, but it can be easily adapted to any faith or excluded if the majority of course participants are not members of a faith community.”

PETA also sponsors JesusVeg.org, which promotes vegetarianism among the faithful and points them to peer groups like the Christian Vegetarian Association (CVA), the Essene Church of Jesus Christ and Jewish Vegetarians of North America. CVA claims that “most of us find the [vegetarian] diet tasty, nourishing and spiritually liberating.”

And of course, there could be no green religion without *The Green Bible*, newly published by HarperOne. *The Green Bible* offers, in green-colored ink on recycled paper, a selection of Bible verses that the editors interpret as supporting the leftist environmental agenda. Alongside of God’s word are excerpts from such revered figures as Sojourners’ board chair Brian McLaren

and Jewish environmentalist Ellen Bernstein. Whether you worship Mother Earth or God Himself, it's a one-stop resource.

Religious expression of policy regarding the environment is not limited to the left side of the political spectrum. Commentator Rush Limbaugh has recorded public service announcements in support of the Humane Society of the United States and "faithful stewardship of animals" by religious communities (*Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2009).

The Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation brings a "Biblical world view" to championing the rights of the poor and "effective stewardship of creation." Although at first glance this sounds much like ICCR in combating environmental racism, the Cornwall Alliance argues that it is the environmentalist agenda that harms the poor. For instance, higher-cost fuel due to environmental restrictions will hurt lower-income Americans, who spend a higher percentage of their income on energy. Cornwall worries that the much-ballyhooed production of ethanol could also shift resources away from food production and result in higher food prices for the poor.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) insists on a religious point of view in forming public policy, yet the IRD rejects much of the leftist environmental agenda. According to the IRD, "Many of the solutions offered to the environmental problems we face are nothing more than thinly veiled arguments for statism, population control and limits on development. Solutions to an environmental problem that trap the poor in their poverty are not solutions. Solutions which advocate population control (which almost always includes abortion on demand) are also not solutions."

### Interpreting the Word

What is particularly interesting is the way that leftist environmentalists are now crafting their messages to appeal to religious voters. EEN's website, for instance, refers to the responsibility to "tend the garden," a suggestion that environmentalist actions will somehow bring God's people back to the stewardship role of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Environmentalists took a more caustic approach in the 1960s and 1970s by chastising Americans for their pollution and conspicuous consumption. That message—which



sounded more like a reminder of mankind's "fall from grace" and "original sin," with an eye toward the final destruction of the world—has not entirely disappeared. However, the moral attack on conspicuous consumption and pollution largely failed as an environmentalist tactic in the 1970s and 1980s, and it is now religious leaders who are being co-opted into preaching that message.

The apocalyptic message of ecological collapse is the currently favored message. In "A Necessary Apocalypse" (*AmericanThinker.com*, Feb. 2, 2007), J.R. Dunn offers a fascinating insight into the evolution of environmentalists' attempts to frighten us with ever more shrill warnings of doom and gloom. The tendency began with Rachel Carson's 1960s warning of poisonous toxins in her book *Silent Spring*. Overpopulation, universal famine and nuclear catastrophe were the favored doomsday scenarios, but all failed to incite the universal alarm and political power that the environmentalist lobby craved.

The issue of global warming, however, has fared much better. The success of the global warming message relies substantially on its religious overtones, integrating all the doomsday scenarios into its message. Dunn writes:

It holds that carbon dioxide (a naturally-occurring compound that comprises a large portion of the atmosphere) is a

form of pollution, the same as Carson's detested synthetic chemicals. Like that involving overpopulation, the threatened catastrophe is universal, and implicated in everyday practices and institutions. As with the universal famine, the effects are concrete and horrifying, though the dates have been left vague—"in the coming century," rather than in a year or two. As with the nuclear freeze, the human villains are easily identified, their actions, which place all human life in jeopardy, beyond redemption.

### Environmentalism as Religion

Alarming, environmentalism has taken on the mantle of a religion in itself. Elements of religion such as sacraments, sin, guilt, apocalypse and universalism abound in environmentalist propaganda. The apocalyptic message of global warming is one example of a highly religious prophesy. By relying on pseudo-science and faith-based interpretations of both scientific research and political arguments, many environmentalist manifestos sound more like the Bible's Book of Revelations than a policy report.

Consider, for example, the act of penance that environmentalists ask of themselves and others: turning off the lights for one minute on "Earth Day." While this collective act might be covered in some news outlets, it is not likely to generate news coverage to help recruit participants. The purpose certainly isn't to make a significant impact on energy consumption in general. Instead, turning off the lights is an opportunity for green enthusiasts to sit in the dark and reflect on their own individual responsibility for the destruction of their world. Just as many Christians are asked to despair of their original sin and consequently strive to overcome their inadequacy with acts of faith and charity, so do modern-day environmentalists flagellate themselves with the guilt of not doing enough to save the earth.

Environmentalists also have sacraments, or symbolic rituals, that sustain their membership and personal dedication to the cause. Recycling is one example. While touted as a response to over-consumption and pollution, experts warn that much recycling is an ineffective way to sort out and separate materials headed for the city dump. The greater social purpose of recycling is to involve individuals

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in a mass movement. By engaging in actions that are simple, repetitive, and sacrificial, individuals are reminded of their personal responsibility for the collective disaster of environmental degradation. As in a religious ritual, the individual is brought symbolically and spiritually into the larger mass of the faithful. James Twitchell put it succinctly in his book *Lead Us Into Temptation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): “[w]e indulge in fuzzy feel-good thinking because we live in a time when meaning and purpose are hard to come by, and much of what we have for meaning resides in manufactured objects. We want these objects, and, if the price we have to pay is the ritual of sacramental separation, then so be it.”

There are even what appear to be indulgences within the environmentalist religion. Indulgences are promises of forgiveness by the Catholic Church for sins committed by the person receiving the indulgence, and Protestants rebelled against the sale of indulgences in the Middle Ages. Among environmentalists, these pseudo-indulgences take the form of Al Gore’s “carbon offsets” that believers can purchase to negate carbon emissions. The “carbon footprint” by which every person, simply because he or she exists, sins against the earth can be eased or eliminated by purchase of these “carbon offsets.”

The Biblical creation story of the Garden of Eden and mankind’s fall from grace reverberates throughout environmentalist rhetoric. Environmentalists assume that there was once an original state of nature, in which humans had no impact on the environment, and that it maintained an ideal state of equilibrium among evolutionary, predatory, geologic and atmospheric systems. The purpose of modern environmentalism is to return to that state of grace, now termed “sustainability.” Michael Crichton poked fun at the idea in a widely-quoted 2003 speech to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco: “We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment.”

Even more telling is the snake behind our fall from grace: technology. Corporate innovation and technology, combined with a competitive marketplace, have allegedly taken mankind down a path of environmental destruction.

As Adam and Eve tragically sampled from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to be more like God, so modern humans sin against Mother Earth by inventing and using modern technology. (One dilemma: Environmentalists have made extraordinarily effective use of the Internet to achieve their policy and political goals.)

The mythical parallel to the Garden of Eden story explains in part why many environmentalists are suspicious of technology as a solution. Technology and industry got us into this mess, they argue, and we will sin even more by relying on innovation as a “way out.” It is important to recognize that this fear is based on an assumption that we actually are in a mess and have wandered away from a perfect “garden.”

“Suppose that the [Bible] narrative turned out differently, that Adam and Eve were forgiven and allowed to remain in the garden,” proposes Audrey Chapman, a religious ethicist at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C., in *Consumption, Population and Sustainability: Perspectives From Science and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999). She argues that human progress, tied to population growth, would have destroyed the Garden of Eden just as it has our home in exile. Adam and Eve would have procreated and turned to technology, which “is likely to have been intrusive and affected the ecological balance.” Eventually “humans would have undermined their paradise and turned it into a polluted and depleted landscape.”

In a commentary in the May 5 edition of the National Catholic Reporter—a weekly newspaper that selectively cites Catholic values to promote a leftist political agenda—Irene Quesnot recently argued that the current economic recession offers Americans an opportunity to give up the comforts that damage the environment. “How can we as a nation afford to keep ourselves ignorant of the dangers for others that result from our lifestyle?” asks Quesnot, a minister at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio. She adds, “Remember life without cell phones or computers? It wasn’t so bad.”

Curiously, the environmentalist version of the Garden of Eden story rivals a central theme in Judeo-Christian theology: mankind’s God-

given dominance over all of creation. Has God made the earth and its resources available to mankind for our creative influence, or are we not lords over all creation? James Watt, Secretary of the Interior in the Reagan administration, underscored this difference when he claimed, “The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and to use for profitable purposes on the way to the hereafter” (*Saturday Evening Post*, January/February 1982).

It is environmentalists’ skewed definition of Christian “stewardship” that allows them to sidestep the thorny question of mankind’s inheritance of the earth. While emphasizing the responsibility of mankind to take good care of the resources entrusted to him, environmentalists ignore the complimentary right to consume those resources for the good of mankind. In fact, what many consider responsible consumption is portrayed as an evil that leads to resource depletion and pollution. A productive profit-making marketplace is likewise treated as an occasion for sin.

It is for this reason that environmentalism has been embraced by many modern socialists. John Bellamy Foster, an editor of the socialist *Monthly Review*, advocates Marxist socialism as the only cure for pollution and overconsumption in his December 2000 article, “Capitalism’s Environmental Crisis: Is Technology the Answer?” He writes, “There is an irreversible environmental crisis within global capitalist society. But setting aside capitalism, a sustainable relation to the earth is not beyond reach. To get there, we have to change our social relations.”

But economist Michael LaFaive of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, an advocate for the free market, argues that suspicions of “the ruthless, profit-driven corporate world”—which are shared by both environmentalists and many religious leaders—lead to a “faulty premise” that the environment can only be protected by government and public controls. Noting that the efficient use of resources is one of the best ways to protect the environment, LaFaive cites the superior efficiency of the free market. He also argues respect for private property, pointing out that “no one has the same economic incentive to protect ‘common’ goods and therefore, few if any people work to protect them.”

## Benefits of Religion?

What does the environmentalist movement gain by assuming a religious character? Most obviously, it gains access to new sources of funding and willing acolytes.

The Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), for example, represents primarily religious organizations with a combined investment portfolio of more than \$100 billion. ICCR attempts to sway the decisions of corporations through shareholder resolutions and by strong-arming corporations to adopt a leftist environmental agenda regarding pollution in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In February, ICCR released “climate risk profiles” on more than 150 corporations—from Abbott Laboratories to Yum! Brands—that are the subjects of 2009 shareholder resolutions filed by faith-based investors, public pension funds and other investors. Resolutions calling for increased attention to businesses’ alleged impact on climate change have especially targeted ICCR’s nine “Climate Watch” companies in five key industries: electric power (Southern); coal (Massey Energy, Consol Energy); oil and gas (Ultra Petroleum, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Canadian Natural Resources); automotive (General Motors); and home building (Standard Pacific).

But religious environmentalism is really an insincere strategy. The approach distorts the concept of Christian stewardship and turns it into an anti-consumption and anti-market ideology. Christian concepts such as the lordship of mankind over the earth are simply overlooked. Stewardship of God’s resources also does not imply that consumption of those resources is an evil. In fact, the proper stewardship of resources requires the efficient, joyful and plentiful consumption of those resources. Market competition is one of the ways to ensure the efficient use of resources. There is nothing inherent in the concept of stewardship that would require us to oppose consumerism or capitalism.

Many Christian organizations have begun to recognize how leftist environmentalists have distorted the concept of stewardship. For instance, the “We Get It” organization has stated that “Our stewardship of creation must be based on Biblical principles and factual evidence. We face important environmental challenges, but must be cautious of claims that our planet is in peril from speculative

dangers like man-made global warming.” We Get It is supported by a wide variety of individuals, churches and organizations, including the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Family Research Council and Dr. James Dobson, who recently retired as head of Focus on the Family. The “We Get It.org Declaration” proclaims, “With billions suffering in poverty, environmental policies must not further oppress the world’s poor by denying them basic needs. Instead, we must help people fulfill their God-given potential as producers and stewards.”

It’s likely that recycling rituals and vague appeals to Christian stewardship will be inadequate once it becomes clear that the environmentalist left is asking the middle class and corporate industry to make extreme sacrifices for the sake of policies that will ultimately serve some interests at the expense of others.

The mantle of religiosity assumed by environmentalists is proving to be more like the emperor’s new clothes—not hiding much. LifeWay Research recently published a survey of 1,002 Protestant pastors in October 2008. It found that 47% of Protestants pastors agree with the statement “I believe global warming is real and man-made,” while 47% do not. This is hardly a religious mandate for the leftist environmental agenda. What is even more telling is that 93% of pastors who consider their political ideology liberal or very liberal agreed with the statement, compared to 37% of “conservative” and 16% of “very conservative” pastors. It is clear, then, that environmental politics will not be changed by the introduction of religious arguments. It will continue to follow the battle lines staked out by traditional interest groups.

“A mirror reflects a man’s face, but what he is really like is shown by the kind of friends he chooses” (Proverbs 27:19).

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon  
President

# Briefly Noted

Left-wing activists who want political show trials of **Bush** administration officials over War on Terror policies get their funding from **George Soros**. A search **Capital Research Center** conducted to find the domain name registration record for a new pressure group called the **Commission on Accountability** revealed that the group's website address, [commissiononaccountability.org](http://commissiononaccountability.org), was reserved for Soros by **Blue State Digital, LLC**, a research and media firm that BusinessWeek last summer called Obama's "secret weapon." At least eight of the 19 left-leaning institutional members of the Commission—including the **Constitution Project** and **Human Rights Watch**—are funded by the secretive Soros.

The **American Conservative Union** is leading a campaign to prevent **Cass Sunstein**, a liberal law professor, from becoming the Obama administration's regulatory "czar." Sunstein is known for his advocacy of animal rights and behavioral economics, the view that emotion not rational self-interest is the basis of human action and should be the foundation of public policy and constitutional interpretation. He has also urged that the Fairness Doctrine be applied to the Internet and wrote an op-ed titled, "Why We Should Celebrate Paying Taxes."

The New York Times reports that environmentalists inadvertently emailed a copy of a memo in which they argued their vocabulary needs a strategic overhaul. A nonprofit environmental marketing and messaging firm in Washington called **ecoAmerica** said it believes the phrase "global warming" conjures images of long-haired hippies and economic deprivation. The firm urges greens to drop the term and instead talk about "our deteriorating atmosphere," and about "moving away from the dirty fuels of the past." It also wants enviro groups to refer to the economy-killing cap-and-trade carbon crackdown as "cap and cash back" and "pollution reduction refund."

Meanwhile, consumer advocate and frequent presidential candidate **Ralph Nader** said the Obama administration's proposed cap-and-trade system, aimed at reducing emissions of carbon dioxide, won't work. "It's too complex. It's too easily manipulated politically," the longtime liberal crusader told the New York Times.

And although media reports suggest the U.S. House of Representatives may not move forward with a vote on climate change legislation this year, liberal financier George Soros is moving forward with investment in **Powerspan**, a company that makes coal-plant carbon dioxide capture technology. The company claims the technology will catch 90% of carbon emissions, the Business Insider reports.

**MoveOn.org** has been sending out emails to its members promoting another left-wing group, **MomsRising.org**. It's a three-year-old 501(c)4 lobbying group headed by MoveOn co-founder **Joan Blades** that uses vaguely pro-family sounding language to dress up its desire to foist more anti-family Big Government programs on the nation. The group pushes for legally mandated maternity/paternity leave and government-provided daycare and healthcare. Its allies listed on its website include **AFL-CIO**, **ACORN**, **AFSCME**, **Families USA**, **National Organization for Women (NOW)**, **Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California** and **SEIU**.

Rev. **Jesse Jackson**, the liberal shakedown artist who heads the **Rainbow/PUSH Coalition**, is being sued by a speakers' bureau for failing to deliver a speech in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad. The company is seeking \$100,000 in damages from the renowned shakedown artist who allegedly failed to show for an event in 2007.