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# An Earth Day for Liberals and Conservatives

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In 1970, Democratic Senator Gaylord Nelson and Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey came together for the first Earth Day. It was a different time. There was bipartisan support for regulating dirty factories, toxic dumps, polluted water, and the loss of wilderness. President Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and enacted most of our environmental laws. President Ronald Reagan designated 10.6 million acres as protected land and ratified the Montreal Protocol to reduce gases that deplete the Earth's ozone layer.

People, both liberals and conservatives, saw the value in cleaning up our act and living

sustainably.

Now, 45 years later, the environmental movement has changed. A sharp line divides environmentalists to the left and everyone else to the right. There's a common misconception that if you're for the environment, you're against humankind — you can't have trees *and* jobs; renewable energy *and* affordable energy; healthy food *and* available food.

But faith groups are challenging these preconceived notions and creating an environmentalism that is as good for us as it is for the birds, bees, and polar bears.

## **Environmentalism for the Poor and Vulnerable**

When the EPA proposed rules to regulate carbon emissions last June, faith groups voiced their overwhelming support. Their reasoning ranged from a moral obligation from God to protect the planet — an idea of stewardship — to a concern about the wellbeing of vulnerable communities that will be the hardest hit by environmental damage. In other words, they saw that protecting the environment was also a way to protect the safety and health of people.

“Climate change disproportionately impacts the very people who we are called to serve,” said Patricia Bruckbauer, an eco-justice fellow at Creation Justice Ministries. “Those who have consistently contributed the least to our changing climate are generally the ones who suffer the most ... low-income communities, communities of color, the elderly and children.”

“This is not about polar bears; it's not about future life; it's about current reality and children's health,” Rev. Mitch Hescox, a Republican and president of the Evangelical Environmental Network, said in a telephone interview. “We're not going to get anywhere if it remains a liberal issue.”

“As people of faith called to care for God's people and Creation, especially the most vulnerable, we have a moral obligation to address the profound impacts of the way we use energy,” said Rev. Canon Sally G. Bingham, President and Founder of Interfaith Power & Light. “In addition to protecting our climate, curbing pollution from power plants offers many important benefits, including saving lives and reducing health risks to those suffering from heart disease and respiratory ailments such as asthma.”

## **A New, More “Godly” Economic System**

Like American faith groups, Pope Francis sees a relationship between ecological devastation and human suffering. But, to him, environmentalism isn't just about safeguarding health and environmental justice. It's about worshiping the God of Creation instead of golden idols.

Speaking at a conference for the poor, unemployed, and landless last October, Pope Francis denounced an "economic system centered on the god of money" that needs to "plunder nature to sustain the frenetic rhythm of consumption that is inherent to it." According to Pope Francis, the "humble, those who live near coasts in precarious dwellings or who are so vulnerable economically that, in face of a natural disaster, lose everything" will be the ones to suffer from environmental degradation.



Catholic bishops from around the world have picked up Pope Francis's message and urged world leaders to act on climate change. Writing to negotiators at the UN climate talks in Lima last winter, the bishops said, "We recognize that much good has happened on Earth through the rightful and responsible intelligence, technology and industry of humankind under God's love care. And yet in recent decades many grave adversities such as climate change, with its devastating impact on Nature itself, on food security, health and migration, led to a great number of suffering people worldwide."

## **The Non-Believers**

Although more and more religious leaders and faith groups are working to protect the environment, there are still those that hold on to the false belief that you can't be for the environment and for people.

Calvin Beisner, spokesman for the conservative Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of

Creation, has declared the U.S. environmental movement to be “un-biblical” and a false religion, and even Jesus probably couldn’t convince him otherwise. He has published articles to confuse Christians about the science of climate change. He has made false claims that helping the environment will hurt the poor. And his group has released a video urging Christians to “resist the Green Dragon.” Last December, Beisner even had the *cojones* to tell the Pope to “back off” with his environmental claims. Unsurprisingly, the Pope hasn’t responded to Beisner.

It would be easy to dismiss Beisner and his friends, like Rush Limbaugh, as just misguided members of the fringe, if conservative politicians who receive donations from the oil and gas industry didn’t use their talking points.

Case in point: anti-environmental, climate-change denier Senator James Inhofe who ironically serves as the Chairman for the Committee on the Environment and Public Works. He has said that it is arrogant “to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what [God] is doing in the climate” — a talking point of both Beisner and Limbaugh. This religious rhetoric is quite convenient for Inhofe who receives substantial contributions from the Koch brothers and the oil and gas industry.

## **Re-Centering the Environmental Movement**

Fortunately, religious leaders and faith groups are raising their voices louder for the environment and drowning out the non-believers. They are holding banners, attending hearings, publishing their own articles, and releasing their own videos. Evangelical scientists are making the case for climate change and calling for action. Religious leaders and congregations are working to protect communities at risk of environmental degradation. And organizations representing millions of Christians are divesting from fossil fuels.

And while this work is important to the environment, it’s also important to the environmental movement because it brings it back to the center. Faith groups are bridging the divide and creating an environmentalism that liberals and conservatives can agree upon — an environmentalism that protects the trees, the polar bears, and us.

*EdenKeeper is an information source for those interested in the connection between religion and the environment. If you would like to read more visit: [www.edenkeeper.org](http://www.edenkeeper.org).*

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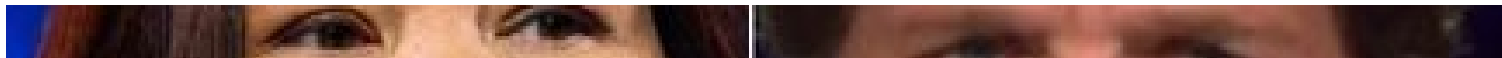
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