



Environmental Issues

Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross

By Paul Kivel

Salvation, in the Christian scheme of things, is the humbling of nature by the miraculous; the intrusion of the supernatural in history. Moreover, the nearest thing in the physical universe that reflects the miraculous is man.

S. Parvez Manzoor¹

Belief in humans' God-given right to dominion over the earth leads directly to justifying its exploitation. Most people would say that global climate change is one of the most serious issues facing human society. The United States, with only 5% of the world's population, contributes about 45% of global carbon dioxide pollution, a main cause of global heating.² And yet US national policies over the last 25 years have been cautious, resistant to change and, at times, even belligerently against measures that might mitigate our society's global impact.

There are many causes of environmental degradation, foremost among them being the *dominate and destroy* mentality of corporate capitalism. Christianity plays an important role by providing concepts supporting human-centered dominance of the natural world and disregard for the long-term impact of human behavior on the Earth.

¹ Parvez Manzoor. "Islamic Ecological Ethics - A Framework." Spirit of Cordoba website. [online]. [cited September 20, 2012]. spiritofcordoba.org/articles/41-islamic-ecological-ethics-a-framework.html.

² Sholnn Freeman. "Pollution in Overdrive." *Washington Post*, June 28, 2006. [online]. [cited September 21, 2012]. washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/27/AR2006062701757.html.





For premillennialists, environmental problems are indicators of the coming Apocalypse, so there is no urgency to attend to earthly matters; God will soon destroy the world. For postmillennialists - including the growing environmental movement within some Christian circles³ - taking care of the Earth is our responsibility, and even essential to our well-being. The goal is to preserve human life and viability on the planet.⁴ But even when the word dominion is interpreted as meaning stewardship, the basic framework holds humans separate from the Earth and in charge of it. Humans have consistently put their interests first and have not listened to the feedback provided by the natural world about our impact on the biological balance on Earth. Concepts such as stewardship or husbandry substitute dominion with a more sustainable, but still human-centered approach, and do not reflect a reciprocal relationship between people and all other life.

There is little room in a hierarchical and anthropocentric belief system for humans to live in balance and harmony within nature, to respect life in all forms and to be humble on the Earth. This system of belief has large-scale repercussions. We cannot easily learn from the world about how to live sustainably and in balance with nature if the source of all knowledge is God and the wisdom of animals, plants and the Earth itself is not respected. In addition, implementing policies based on ideas of progress, development and manifest destiny, the US continues to destroy many indigenous peoples, along with their accumulated skills and experience, who do respect and work harmoniously with the planet's life force.

As confidence in the myth of progress fades, many people are unable to envision alternatives to Christian-based, human-centered science for solution to our problems.

³ For examples of this movement see Mallory McDuff's books *Sacred Acts: How Churches are Working to Protect Earth's Climate*. New Society, 2012 and *Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth*. Oxford, 2010.

⁴ Of course, extreme forms of corporate and individual greed guide some to not even care about human life. For them, confidence in progress and development are unfettered.





In fact, the belief system itself is the underlying problem we face, given its assumption everything in the world is inanimate, exploitable and available to be turned into a commodity for human profit.

We must search far outside the dominant framework to act from different values, ones that actually move us towards a sustainable future for all life and spirit on Earth.

Paul Kivel is an educator, activist and writer with decades of experience working on issues of violence prevention and social justice. His books and curricula include Uprooting Racism, Men's Work, You Call This a Democracy?, Helping Teens Stop Violence, Build Community and Stand for Justice and Living in the Shadow of the Cross. Information about his work, books, and other resources is available at www.paulkivel.com and www.christianhegemony.org.

