

JONATHAN AITKEN



A Change in the Climate

“Climate change will become in the 21st century what slavery became in the 18th century—a great moral and spiritual issue.”

THIS PREDICTION, MADE RECENTLY by an outstanding Anglican bishop (of whom more later), is one of many signs and portents from around the world that saving the environment is becoming a spiritual as well as a secular cause for Christian campaigners. This is a new religious development that could have profound political consequences, particularly in the Republican Party. For the radical fervor with which increasing numbers of evangelicals are embracing environmental issues has put them on a collision course with their natural conservative allies in the GOP. For example, there is real evangelical anger directed against Senator James Inhofe, the Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on the Environment, for describing climate change as “a hoax.” The times they are a-changing when what the old politics regards as a hoax is seen by the new theology as a holy grail. So what is going on at this intriguing intersection of politics and religion?

A provocative headline featured in a recent campaign of magazine and newspaper ads from the Evangelical Environmental Network asked the question, “What Would Jesus Drive?” Definitely not an SUV, was the answer. The small print of the ads claimed that car pollution “contributes to global warming

putting millions at risk from drought, thirst, hunger and homelessness.” It ended with the clarion cry: “We call upon America’s automobile industry to manufacture more fuel-efficient vehicles. And we call upon Christians to drive them.”

The seeds of this values-before-vehicles evangelism seemed likely to fall upon stony ground in Detroit and to be choked by the thorny public relations men of Big Oil. Yet despite these negatives there are signs that such messages are playing positively and strongly in the ecclesiastical equivalent of Peoria—the evangelical churches where some 80 million Americans now worship. In response to pressure from their pews, officials from some 30 church denominations, including the Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant grouping in the U.S., have now signed an agreement known as the Sandy Cove Covenant which calls for a new emphasis on “creation-care” (evangelical speak for environmental protection) and for battle to be joined against global warming.

These moves would not be happening unless those concerned were convinced that they were “Biblically based.” For no true evangelical gets out of bed without his Bible to help in the search for affirmation that all his decisions are in accord with “the word.” As there are not many mentions of SUVs, greenhouse gasses, CO₂ emissions, and so on in the good book, you might think that the word has to be generously interpreted to get it to stretch from the sheep-grazing poli-

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cies of King David to the Kyoto treaty policies of George W. Bush. Nevertheless a coherent new theology on environmental issues is gradually emerging. Its most interesting practitioner is the outstanding bishop whose prediction on the spirituality of climate change is set out in italics at the beginning of this article. He is the Rt. Reverend James Jones, bishop of Liverpool, and author of a fascinating new book, *Jesus and the Earth*.

Bishop James Jones is not some sandal-wearing Episcopal maverick of the type who goes out to grab headlines and ruffle politicians' feathers. He is a pillar of the establishment, recently (and many think unluckily) the runner-up in the Church of England's selection races for the archbishoprics of both York and Canterbury. But the throne of Augustine's loss may turn out to be the global environment's gain. For Bishop James Jones is the pioneer of what his followers around the world are calling "earth theology." Its bottom line is that mainstream Christian orthodoxy should embrace the cause of fighting for a clean environment and a pure atmosphere but not by outright opposition to consumerism and economic growth. "Christianity is a religion of consumption," writes Jones, adding the crucial rider that the Bible envisages humanity as discerning, responsible, and ethical consumers.

HERE WE BEGIN TO ENTER THE REALMS of earth theology. For as the author travels through many of the 863 references in the Bible to the word earth (165 of them in the New Testament), a holistic picture emerges that a Sovereign God and Creator demands good stewardship of his earth. Moreover, Jones is able to demonstrate, perhaps more clearly than any other modern theologian, that Jesus seems to be especially conscious of his relationship with the earth and that the earth seems vigorously vocal as the mission of Jesus unfolds.

As skeptics have noted, some evangelicals find it possible to extrapolate the most extraordinary meanings from individual verses in the Bible. For that reason, a note of caution needs to be sounded about the more extreme pronouncements from militant Christian environmentalists. For example, their emphasis on Revelation II:17-19, "The time has come... for destroying those who destroy the earth," can sound more like the spirit of the jihad than the Gospels. Yet the wiser evangelical leaders in this field such as Bishop James Jones, James Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network, and Richard Cizik of the

National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) are careful to focus their calls for action on issues of environmental protection, renewal, and justice for the poorest nations.

The increasingly influential Cizik, in his leadership role as vice-president for governmental affairs at the NAE, has presciently noted the prospects for growing tension between conservative politicians

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and conservative evangelicals over the environment: "I've tried to avoid saying thus far that we're heading towards a traffic collision because I like to say that we are pro-business and pro-environment," says Cizik. "But do you have two parts of the Republican base who could be at loggerheads? Absolutely."

The loggerheads may yet become talking heads and cooperating heads if the Republican leadership is willing to quietly shift its ground and become more environment-friendly in its policies. Senator John McCain is one presidential hopeful who has caught the new mood by introducing a bill (jointly sponsored with Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman) that calls for a big reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. One of the warmest endorsements for this legislation came from the leading evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, which called the McCain-Lieberman bill "an excellent starting point."

There are going to be a lot of these new starting points as the relationship between the GOP and its evangelical supporters is tested politically and theologically over climate change in the coming months. Maybe a new kind of hot air will produce a new kind of environmentally friendly policy. Watch this space, as the GOP, God, and his earthly representatives in the evangelical movement work it out. ❧

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