
Book Review

Neall W. Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right: The Struggle Between Conservative Evangelicals and the Environmental Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 264 pp., \$42.95 (hbk), ISBN: 9781501762000.

Politico recently published a special report on how a carbon pipeline project, meant to link Big Ethanol to carbon capture technology, was making strange bedfellows in Iowa. The authors quoted Kathy Stockdale, an Iowa farmer who denies climate change and believes only God controls the weather but who nevertheless partnered with the Sierra Club to oppose the pipeline projected to pass through her land: 'I told God that I don't want to do this', by which she meant partnering with an environmental organization. 'I don't want to be involved at first and he said, "No. I want you to"'. She continued, 'Because the land ultimately belongs to him and I need to take care of it. It is our responsibility'. Persuading a neighbor to join her, she reasoned, 'God made me a steward of the land and we have to do what we have to do to take care of it' (Wittenberg 2022). Strange bedfellows indeed. Whereas the Sierra Club opposed the carbon pipeline in favor of more aggressive climate solutions, Stockdale's opposition stemmed from her God-given task to steward her land by protecting it from solutions to what she saw as a fabricated problem.

With his book *The Nature of the Religious Right*, historian Neall Pogue joins the ranks of a growing number of scholars, pre-eminently Darren Dochuk, Katharine Wilkinson, Robin Veldman, and Melanie Gish, understanding people like Stockdale and the sometimes-fraught, sometimes-friendly relationships between evangelical Christians and environmentalists. Pogue's well-researched history of the development and fate of conservative evangelicals' environmental philosophy documents the complex backstory that explains Stockdale's hesitancy to partner with the Sierra Club as well as her rationale for ultimately doing so. According to Pogue's analysis of the evidence, by Earth Day 1970 conservative evangelicals developed an eco-friendly theology and philosophy of Christian environmental stewardship (CES) that affirmed the value of nature and the imperative to care for creation even when it impinged on economic activity.

Furthermore, they maintained this philosophy through the 1980s and early 1990s while trading direct attacks with environmentalists, rejecting President Reagan's anti-environmentalism, and giving primacy to other culture war issues. They abandoned it around 1993 and 1994, when political conservatives ultimately succeeded in associating environmentalism with a number of conspiracy theories. Given today's political climate, readers will be shocked to learn, for instance, that Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, promoted pro-environmental views during his 1988 presidential bid and his speech at the Republican National Convention, and in the early 1990s the Southern Baptist leader Richard Land organized a major Southern Baptist event promoting CES, published a book on it, and

and even co-signed, with Carl Sagan, 'The Joint Appeal by Religion & Science for the Environment'. After a close analysis of the historical evidence from conservative evangelical leaders, Christian textbook publishers, and case studies that represent the evangelical grassroots, Pogue concludes that the relationship between conservative evangelicals and environmentalists could have taken a different, more cooperative path. He hopes that better understanding this history, and its missed opportunities, will generate possibilities for future cooperation.

What distinguishes Pogue's argument is his balanced, evidence-based diagnosis of what went wrong, pointing to the failures of mainstream environmentalists as much as evangelical groups. While CES had been conservative evangelicals' mainstream position until the early '90s, a minority movement within this community ultimately succeeded in convincing leaders and grassroots groups to reject CES in favor of a nationalist, pro-free market, pro-family, anti-bureaucracy ideology that read Genesis as a theological mandate to 'improve' the Earth by using its resources for economic growth and poverty alleviation. The consequential shift was from seeing God as having created a dynamic relationship between human and environmental flourishing to seeing the Earth as primarily a storehouse of resources to be used for human benefit. While CES survived among an evangelical minority, these politically conservative insurgents largely convinced conservative evangelicals that environmentalists were Earth-worshipping extremists seeking to bring about a one-world government. Pogue argues that Richard Land's journey reflected the struggle evangelicals faced around 1993: they had to choose between continuing to promote CES, thus associating themselves with conspiratorial extremists and risking rejection by their religious community, or accepting that the environment—though still a good worth preserving—could be sacrificed for economic development. Here, Pogue seems eager to inform conservative evangelicals that their movement was once characterized by a theologically rooted embrace of environmental stewardship. 'Evangelicals should at least acknowledge and remember their own community's history', for it 'promoted the nuanced philosophy of Christian environmental stewardship that strove to respect God as creator and to protect both humanity and the nonhuman environment' (p. 180). Pogue even suggests that their CES philosophy resonates with environmental justice concerns that have become more central to environmentalism in recent years.

Examining a lesser understood side of this history, Pogue also demonstrates that mainstream environmentalists share the blame for sour relations with evangelicals. According to his analysis, where leaders of the modern environmental movement could have found allies, they instead created enemies. For instance, the handbook produced for the first Earth Day teach-ins in 1970 included articles that blamed Christianity for environmental degradation and suggested people embrace other, more Earth-friendly religions. Environmentalists also tended to separate humanity from nature in their efforts to preserve wilderness, which, Pogue argues, contradicted CES's more dynamic view of humanity as both member and steward of nature. In other words, not only free-marketeers but leading environmentalists also played an active role in creating the idea that there is an inherent conflict between the environment and the economy, which turned off many people in industry-dependent, so-called 'Red States', to environmental action. Here, Pogue seems intent on convincing environmentalists that they, too, can do better. Whether addressing evangelicals, environmentalists, or scholars, Pogue's historical argument is ultimately forward-looking: 'Perhaps remembering this past might help build future bridges between environmentalists

and conservative evangelicals' (p. 180).

By now, scholars of American evangelicalism and environmentalism largely agree that the relationship between them has been complex and contingent, a story neither of simple embrace nor simple antipathy. Through his careful analysis of primary sources and representative case studies of leaders and grassroots groups, Pogue's book bolsters this conclusion. Yet his book does more. His story of missed opportunities is also an invitation to make allies. Pogue suggests that Christian environmental stewardship, whose spokespersons now include Katherine Hayhoe, Richard Cizik, and the Evangelical Environmental Network, is an important contribution to contemporary environmental thought. He also challenges conservative evangelicals who have traded in their theologically based eco-friendly philosophies for pragmatic trade-offs and political ideologies.

One topic that Pogue touches on, but which deserves more attention and theorization, is the role the issue of climate change played in religious conservatives' abandonment of their eco-friendly views. As climate change became the issue around which all other environmental concerns revolved, it changed not only the nature of the religious right, but also transformed the nature of environmentalism. Pogue rightly draws attention to the early 1990s when these changes were taking place. However, it will fall to others to examine the degree to which climate change discourse and politics remade environmentalism, including religious environmentalism and anti-environmentalism, and to chart pathways beyond the pragmatic tradeoffs and ideological binaries it helped bring about.

The book is accessible for scholars and students interested in the history of religion and environmentalism in the US and is an example of how to use historical methods to examine environmental views among religious leaders and grassroots groups. Admirably, Pogue stays close to the historical evidence he gathered, thus refusing to score cheap ideological points and assigning praise and blame where due. In doing so, Pogue demonstrates how to tether one's hope for future collaboration to a careful treatment of the historical evidence: conservative evangelical anti-environmentalism is neither original nor fixed; 'Christian environmental stewardship could again "take a different path"' (p. 180).

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References

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