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## Changing Hearts: The Future of the Environmental Movement

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## “Changing Hearts: The Future of the Environmental Movement”

By **Emily Casey**

### ABSTRACT

For many, the environmental movement is a consumer fad with very little intellectual or emotional investment. Generally, sustainability is deemed a “good thing” but given low priority at both the personal level and the public policy level. In this paper, I argue that environmentalism must be modified to meet the needs of the general populace in order to gain momentum as a contemporary political movement. In other words, I examine how the environmental movement can attract the massive number of active members necessary to change public policy and conclude that this movement will need to adapt to the public in two ways. First, I suggest that it should transition to an anthropocentric, or human-oriented, angle when introducing people to the merits of sustainability. While biocentric ethics, or the recognition of the intrinsic value of all life forms, is an essential component of sustainability, I maintain that a clear emphasis on human life will be more compelling for potential new members. In support of this claim, I emphasize that the human impact of the BP oil spill has roused recent public interest in environmentalism. Second, I explore the unique capacity of faith communities in the United States to change hearts and unite believers into political action. I demonstrate that Christian communities have changed public policy by relentlessly decrying human rights violations in the past, namely during the civil rights movement. Similarly, I hold that Christian communities should champion the cause of sustainability<sup>1</sup> and environmental justice as part of a larger concern for human rights.

### **Identifying the Problem: Attitudes and Behavior**

Americans have a variety of perspectives when it comes to environmental degradation, with the majority holding the belief that it is not an urgent or highly important issue. The Center for Environmental Law and Policy at Yale University has identified six categories that Americans generally fall into, ranging from completely disengaged to significantly alarmed. In a 2010 study, 35 percent responded as “unaware and disengaged,” “doubtful of any problem,” or “completely dismissive” (Lieserowitz et al). Another 27 percent were “cautious”—those who were unsure whether climate change is human-caused and do not find it an urgent problem (Leiserowitz et al). Some Americans profess an optimistic confidence in the environment. In a 2010 Gallup poll, 46

percent described current U.S. environmental conditions as “excellent” or “good” (Morgan). Only 2 percent of respondents in this poll found the environment to be the most important problem facing the United States today (Morgan). Granted, the declining economy in recent times has distracted the focus from environmental issues, as is especially evidenced in the polls. Regardless, we can conclude that environmentalism is unlikely to become a national priority given these types of statistics. A significant portion of the population will require a radical change in attitude and perspective before major reform can occur at the national level.

Among those that *do* regard environmental degradation as a critical problem, many do not engage in sustainable lifestyles. That is to say, a great number of people possess accurate knowledge and awareness of environmental issues, yet they do not consciously attempt to “minimize their negative impact” on the natural world (Kollmuss & Agyeman 240). This phenomenon is widespread—for example, who among us inhibits their vacation travel because they feel guilty to fly on a commercial airliner? Who takes a lower paying job because it is closer to their residence? Who stops eating meat in an effort to combat climate change and world hunger? Very few people are willing to make these difficult sacrifices because the benefits are usually not readily apparent.

Scholars Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman have elaborated on this “gap” between pro-environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behavior. They have identified some common barriers that prevent people from engaging in pro-environmental behavior. First, personal experience plays a major role. Those who have directly encountered environmental degradation are more likely to change their behavior. The correlation between attitude and behavior is significantly weaker when the experience is indirect, such as simply hearing about environmental issues in school. Second, social norms and customs dictate how most people behave. Since the dominant culture fosters a lifestyle that is unsustainable, most people passively accept this and conform to societal norms. Third, it is hard to obtain a true account of attitude in studies, leading to a large discrepancy between perceived attitude and behavior. Questions about attitude are often broad in scope, (e.g. “Are you concerned about the environment?”) while questions about behavior are specific, (e.g. “Do you regularly use public transportation?”). Finally, many people have an external locus of control, meaning they perceive their own actions to be insignificant in

the larger scheme. Believing that they cannot bring about any change themselves, they often become apathetic or resigned. Some will delegate the blame of environmental destruction to other entities, like the government or multi-national corporations. People who succumb to this way of thinking are unlikely to adopt pro-environmental behavior if it involves personal sacrifice (Kollmuss & Agyeman 239-258).

The need for a proactive, environmentally-conscious public exists. At the first level, citizens need to gain an awareness and understanding of the problem and its importance. At the second level, citizens will need to acquire a strong motivation that will ultimately lead to pro-environmental behavior. This will include both personal lifestyle changes and a higher degree of political involvement for the environmental cause. Based on the current public data, the movement clearly needs to modify its strategy for attracting and mobilizing members in order to succeed. To determine how the environmental movement should proceed for the future, we must critically examine the strategies that the movement has employed thus far.

### **A Briefing on the Environmental Movement**

The environmental movement first gained a national presence in the 1970s, with a primary focus of combating sources of pollution and cleaning the air, land, and water. As a result of this initial cleanup effort, air and water quality in the United States improved significantly (Kraft and Mazmanian 14). During this era there was a push toward the preservation of natural resources and protection of public lands. The Endangered Species Act (1973) and the National Forest Management Act (1976) are examples of early policy successes (Kraft and Mazmanian 14). The first epoch of the movement was characterized by a heavy emphasis on strict federal regulation (Kraft and Mazmanian 17). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created as one comprehensive, centralized agency to regulate and implement environmental standards, such as emission controls. The approach was primarily top-down, meaning that uniform policies at the federal level guided the actions of businesses, industries, and municipal governments.

The EPA expanded rapidly, and was attacked politically for being too large and cumbersome of an administration. This marked the second environmental epoch, which largely consisted of a backlash to the environmental movement. This political transition began in the 1980s during the

Reagan administration and lasted through the Republican Congress of the 1990s and the election of George W. Bush in 2000. The conservatism, deregulation, and anti-federalism that dominated this time period proved to be a setback for the environmental movement. Business, industry, and property rights groups successfully lobbied for legislative and administrative changes that were more amenable to their interests. This backlash resulted in a more “decentralized and collaborative” approach toward the environmental agenda. Policymakers began to weigh cost, business opportunity, and incentives when considering what types of legislation to pass. A dominant philosophy emerged that asserted confidence in the ingenuity and creativity of the private sector to create a sustainable, energy-efficient society. Rather than government implementing strict policies for businesses to follow, businesses would be motivated by “incentives and market mechanisms.” (Kraft and Mazmanian 20-21)

This reactionary political tide in recent years has failed to meet the goals of the environmental movement, however. Scholars have identified the present time as the “third epoch” where activists recognize the need for compromise in politics but also call for a “bolder and more comprehensive approach” toward sustainability (Kraft and Mazmanian 22). Pressing concerns, such as climate change and population growth, with specific concerns about the carrying capacity of the Earth, have surfaced since the 1970s. These issues will require “macropolicy” solutions involving a complex network of interdependent actors. In other words, sustainability cannot be achieved through the efforts of a small group of highly motivated, passionate individuals. The movement will need all segments of society to be on board with the goals.

Historically, environmental activism has consisted of highly specialized, decentralized, political interest groups. They have not paired exclusively with any of the traditional parties or major power groups in the country (Sale & Foner 32). In contrast to other social and political movements, the environmental movement is fragmented into a diverse spectrum of causes and interests. For example, Environmental Action (founded in 1970) lobbies extensively on matters regarding toxic waste and energy policy (Sale & Foner 32). Greenpeace began by protesting nuclear testing, but later expanded to include marine life protection in their infamous “Save the Whales” campaign (Sale & Foner 32). Other groups were clearly founded for distinct, straightforward causes, including the Jane Goodall Wildlife Institute, the Center for Marine

Conservation, Food First, Negative Population Growth, and the Hunger Project (Sale & Foner 33). Because they are fragmented into special interests, these small, narrow groups lack the political clout and the ability to attract members of the wider public. Essentially, the movement is driven only by those people who have a deep emotional connection or are personally affected by a *particular* issue. Although these interest groups pursue specific purposes, they are ultimately working toward the broader goal of preservation of the natural world and sustainable human societies. The ideal solution would be to unite the efficiency of these smaller groups into a broader network of political power.

### **Anthropocentrism and Sustainability**

Traditional Western ethics operate on anthropocentric principles, which literally means “human-centered” ones. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines anthropocentrism as assigning “intrinsic value to human beings alone...or a significantly greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to nonhuman things.” Simply put, humans are more important than objects and other living things. When Aristotle declares in *Politics* that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man,” he is espousing an anthropocentric viewpoint (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Anthropocentrism usually justifies the advancement of human interest at the expense of nonhuman interests. This is based on the belief that nonhumans have only instrumental value, or are only valuable “as a means to further some other ends” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). They are judged for their usefulness and efficiency for humans. Conversely, humans have intrinsic value, or value in one’s own right independently of one’s prospects for serving the ends of others. A human does not need to be serving a useful purpose to be deemed valuable; one has worth simply by one’s nature.

While it is evident that humans have a unique position of dominance on Earth, a strong anthropocentric ideology can become quite dangerous. Historian Lynn White published a controversial essay in 1967 entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which places most of the blame on Christianity for the overexploitation of resources and ecological destruction throughout history. The thrust of his essay charges that Judeo-Christian thought promotes the superiority of humans over all other life forms and the reckless abuse of nature for

human benefit. According to White, the belief that God bestowed Earth to humans has caused us to develop a misplaced sense of mastery over the Earth. He writes, “We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim” (White 5). Granted, some Christians do *not* have a stellar record of environmental actions. Yet it is important to recognize the difference between faith and practice. There is ample evidence within Christianity, which will be discussed further, that anthropocentrism is sinful and that humans should develop sustainable lifestyles. Interpretation has always been a key component of Christian ethics. Arrogant anthropocentrism most definitely contributed to the current ecological crisis, so it is important to examine the spectrum of other ethical beliefs in regards to the environment.

In the 1972 “Limits to Growth” study conducted by Dennis Meadows of MIT, researchers commented that a “basic change of values” was needed in relation to the environment. Environmental ethics emerged as an academic discipline in the twentieth century, marking a shift toward the study of biocentric principles (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Biocentrism, contrary to anthropocentrism, extends intrinsic value to all living things. Biocentrism encompasses several different camps of thought. Aldo Leopold presented the theory of “ecocentric” ethics and the land ethic, which emphasizes a holistic approach to the environment. (Derr & McNamara) Under this doctrine, ethical duties are to the ecosystem as a whole, not to individuals. Humans are obligated to include all parts of the land—animate and inanimate—in the ethical community (Derr & McNamara). Preserving the “integrity, beauty, and stability” of the biotic community is the ultimate moral obligation (Derr & McNamara). Arne Næss, a Norwegian philosopher and mountain climber, advocated “biospheric egalitarianism—the belief that all living things whatsoever have a similar right to live and flourish” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). This brand of “deep ecology” advocates human population control and reduced globalization (Derr & McNamara). Several other theories, such as ecofeminism, animal rights theory, and new animism are all offshoots of biocentric ethics (Derr & McNamara).

Although biocentrism is an admirable and legitimate philosophy, its benefits are outweighed by its hindrances for our purposes. By emphasizing biocentric ethics, the environmental movement shifts farther away from mainstream American culture, and often alienates potential members as a consequence. Today in the developed world, most people lack a deep connection with their

natural environment. According to the 2000 U.S. census, nearly 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas (US Census). The average American rarely interacts with wildlife or appreciates the beauty of untouched forests, mountain ranges, or natural bodies of water. In their industrialized surroundings of cities and suburbs, most Americans only understand the importance of their natural environment in an abstract and detached sense (Leiserowitz & Fernandez 18). “We live in a system that has severed or rendered invisible many of our connections to nature—such as the food we eat, or the people and ecosystems from which our consumer products are derived (Leiserowitz & Fernandez 18). Human contact with nature is increasingly through a television screen, causing people to be “both physically and psychologically separated from the natural world” (Leiserowitz & Fernandez 18). Biocentric or ecocentric appeals may fall on deaf ears, or at the very least, they do not trigger the emotion needed to motivate people to engage in a proactive lifestyle. Instead, Americans interact almost exclusively with other humans. Most people care more about humans than nonhumans. Understandably, people identify most with their own species and wish to ensure their own survival.

For these reasons, it is imperative that environmentalism be human-oriented when teaching people about the problem and persuading them to join the movement. People have to feel personally affected in order to change their behavior. “Human-oriented” means that the stories, explanations, and general information focus on the human impact on the environment and the consequences for the future as it pertains to humans. When convincing people of the merits of sustainability, the movement should not be ashamed to capitalize on the anthropocentric ideology of Westerners. It is far more practical to work within an existing cultural ideology than to attempt to recruit people to a new seemingly “radical” one. Many people simply do not realize that environmental objectives are also aimed at improving the welfare of humans. Contrary to prevailing opinion, anthropocentric ethics can be useful in the argument for environmental protection.

In environmental literature, anthropocentrism and biocentrism are often pitted against one another. They appear to be at odds, polar opposites. The most important point to realize is that sustainability benefits *humans* as well as other species. “Without a sustainable environment, the long-term flourishing of individuals within society will become unrealizable” (Barrett 1).



Mankind is a part of nature, dependent upon it for survival. In the larger scheme of the Earth, what is good for the biosphere is good for humanity and all of its future generations. Essentially, it is plausible to have a “humanist conception of sustainability” since humanity is inextricably bound to the earth and counts on its wellbeing (Barrett 1). In the broad spectrum of environmental ethics, humanity should seek a reasonable middle ground. Arrogant anthropocentrism, or “short term and selfish behavior,” will clearly end in self-destruction (Barrett 2). On the other hand, “deep-green thinking” is not completely necessary for the environmental movement to succeed either. As humanity begins to reach the globe’s capacity in the twenty-first century, we must consider distributive justice—how to allocate resources currently while ensuring a fair share of these resources for future generations (Barrett 1).

### **Disaster in the Gulf Coast**

One prominent example of pollution at the expense of others is the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, also known as the “BP oil spill.” On April 20, 2010, a BP-operated drilling rig exploded, killing eleven platform workers and injuring several others. For nearly three months, between 35,000 and 60,000 barrels of crude oil gushed from the seafloor crevice per day as industry professionals scrambled to successfully cap the well (Robertson & Krauss). Since it was not capped until July 15, nearly five million barrels of oil escaped into the ocean (Robertson & Krauss). Federal scientists announced that it is “by far the world’s largest accidental release of oil into marine waters to date” (Robertson & Krauss). A tremendous cleanup operation ensued—17,500 National Guard troops and 20,000 citizens have utilized 2600 sorbent and containment boom vessels, 1 million gallons of dispersant, 1000 boats, and 100 airplanes and helicopters in an effort to restore the Gulf Coast (Levy & Gopalakrishnan). Though this investigation is just in the primary stages, BP will likely have to pay fines between 4.5 and 21 billion dollars (Robertson & Krauss). The long-term consequences of this accident have yet to be determined.

That the Gulf Coast’s complex and sensitive ecosystem was damaged from these excessive plumes of oil goes without saying. Hundreds of dolphins, fish, birds, and turtles died as an immediate result of the spill (Levy & Gopalakrishnan). Biologists predict that the oil will have a negative impact on the millions of birds that migrate through the Gulf per day during the

upcoming season. Even small amounts of oil can make their feathers too heavy to fly, which will cause many birds to perish. Whales, manatees, dolphins, and sea turtles all face “severe risks” for the future as well. Although the dispersants have alleviated the problems caused by oil, the dispersants themselves will likely cause problems. Primarily, they pollute the entire water column and they prevent toxic chemicals from evaporating. This chemical buildup will likely kill most planktonic species and pass through the gills and digestive systems of all marine life (Levy & Gopalakrishnan).

The situation described above is a grave one for the wildlife and ecosystem of the Gulf. Many Americans may think, “It’s unfortunate that animals were harmed, but what does it have to do with me, or other people for that matter?” This spill has actually caused significant harm to humans, particularly those living in the southern coastal states. The foul water, polluted beaches, and contaminated seafood has severely reduced the living conditions of residents, many of whom directly depend on the ocean and beaches for their livelihoods. This disaster caused a dramatic decline in income and many lost their jobs altogether. Fisherman, shrimpers, crabbers, and boat operators essentially lost their trades overnight. The negative effects ripple out as restaurants, manufacturers, and companies that work in the Gulf Coast area struggle to stay afloat. Tourism has plummeted, damaging businesses, house and boat rentals, and the overall economy (Levy & Gopalakrishnan). Louisiana state counseling teams reported higher rates of anxiety, depression, domestic violence, excessive drinking, and suicidal tendencies (Woodward).

Furthermore, the oil spill may have affected the physical health of the locals as well. As medical professionals arrived in the Gulf Coast for the disaster, an “unsettling reality sank in”—that very little is known about the long-term effects of human exposure to crude oil. Volunteers have already experienced respiratory ailments and skin rashes from cleaning the oily sludge in the heat of summer (Woodward). The medical community is uncertain about the potential effects of toxic fumes in the air, tar buildup along the coasts, and chemical dispersants in the water. Research on the health effects of crude oil is sparse, and the existing studies are mainly inconclusive. In Spain, a much smaller oil spill in 2002 has been linked with DNA damage among cleanup workers. Dr. John Howard, the director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, testified to a Senate committee that the spill was “unlikely” to harm people in the long

term but admits that they do not have literature “to tell us what happens when there’s this much oil around populated sites” (Woodward).

It is clear that the BP oil spill has severely devastated the locals of the Gulf Coast. Fifty-four percent of coastal residents in a CBS News poll reported that they were “hurting badly” from the spill, with another 27 percent saying they were “hurting some” (Condon 1). The negative consequences discussed previously could potentially function as motivators toward environmental activism. In a May Gallup poll conducted while the oil was still flowing, a majority of Americans (55%) prioritized environmental protection over energy production (Jones 1). The BP oil spill raises important questions about the future of environmental policy. Will the U.S. governmental policy continue to be primarily reactionary? This will be an increasingly difficult position to maintain. Interestingly, 69 percent of Gulf residents believe that the local environment will eventually recover (Condon 1). Their optimism is admirable, but what will it take for citizens to demand political and social change? Relative to the rest of the nation, the southern United States is a region of exceptional environmental degradation. For the remainder of this paper, I will address how these disadvantaged residents of the South and others can contribute to the larger environmental movement.

### **A Spiritual Change**

The environmental movement will have to take on a moral tone if it is to effectively change hearts and, consequently, change behaviors. As discussed earlier, an emotional connection with the cause and personal experience with ecological damage increases the likelihood that a person will engage in the environmental movement. An emotional connection can be established if the person deeply believes that treatment of the environment is an issue of morality. People must feel a personal desire to “do the right thing.” Along a similar vein, most people in the United States look to the Christian religion for spiritual guidance. In 2008, 76 percent of Americans identified themselves as “Christian” (Kosmin & Keysar). If the Christian community championed the environmental cause as a moral issue, it would drastically aid the environmental movement. Not only would it attract the attention of a broader spectrum of Americans, but it would also have the powerful depth to emotionally connect people to a problem that they may know nothing about.

Although the Christian community has addressed most of the ethical issues today, the ecological dilemma is an exception.

The principles of Christianity do support environmental sustainability, even if religious leaders have avoided the issue. Some Christian scholars have elaborated on this in their writings, emphasizing biblical support for their claims. In Genesis, God lovingly creates the Earth and cares for its entirety, independent of humans (Spencer et al 83). By caring for God's creation, humans are able to worship God and mirror his will (Spencer et al 83). Genesis 2:15 states, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care for it." This quote encapsulates the belief that humans are to act as careful "stewards" or "servant kings" of the earth, rather than selfishly dominating and exploiting it (Spencer et al 88). James Nash asserts that ecological destruction is actually sin. He writes, "Ecologically, sin is the refusal to act in the image of God...it is injustice, the self-centered human inclination to defy God's covenant of justice by grasping more than our due. It is acting like the owner of creation with absolute property rights" (Nash 119). Conversely, to use the resources of the earth frugally and to minimize ecological damage is an expression of love toward other humans. In the Second Commandment, God orders man to "love thy neighbor" (Spencer et al 89). This includes displaying reciprocity and beneficence by restraining one's level of consumption (Nash 192). Although contemporary society glorifies wealth and consumption, the Bible criticizes these luxurious and excessive lifestyles. In one New Testament parable, the leprous beggar Lazarus is denied food from the wealthy man named Dives. In death, Dives is punished for his indulgent lifestyle at the expense of Lazarus' welfare (Northcott 56). The Old Testament in particular emphasizes the responsibility humans have toward others living on the earth now and for generations to come (Spencer et al 91). These basic ideas advocate that Christians should act charitably to other humans as a component of preserving God's creation.

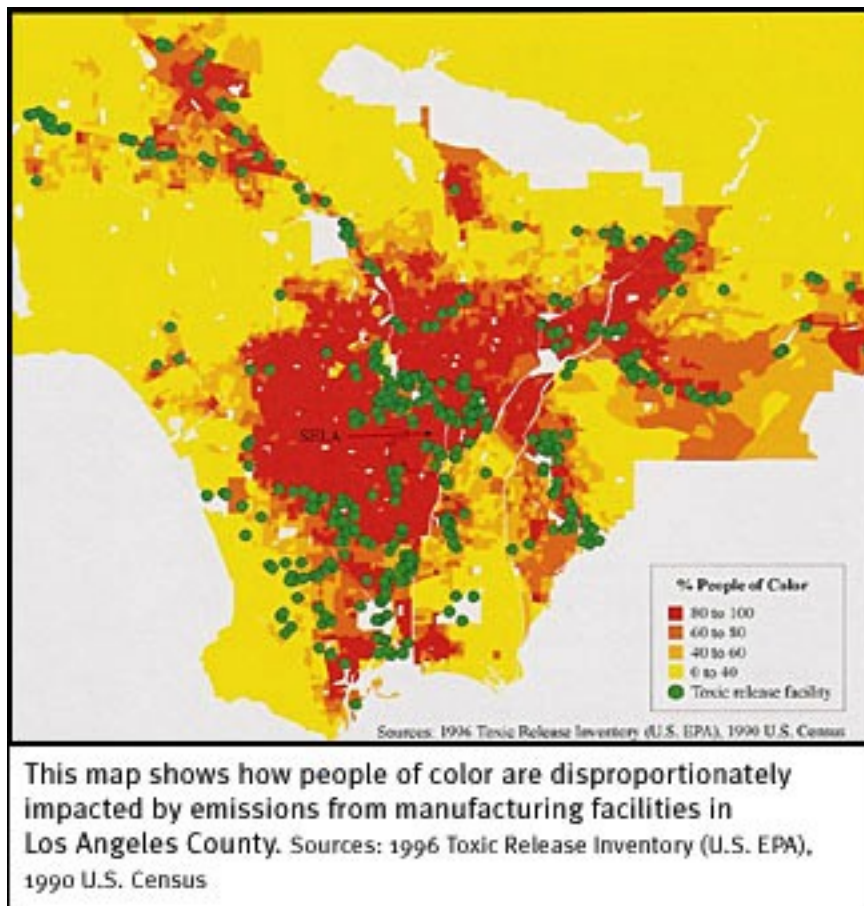
### **The Environmental Justice Movement**

The Christian community has a moral obligation to become involved in the environmental movement. Environmental degradation diminishes the quality of life for the most disadvantaged people. "The strongest moral case for mitigating global warming is that it is already life-threatening to those who are least able to defend themselves, and have no responsibility for its

causation” (Northcott 56). The effects of excessive consumption and pollution are not evenly distributed. Although the smaller numbers of Europeans and Americans have much higher carbon emission rates per capita, the inhabitants of the Southern hemisphere bear the brunt of the ecological damage (Northcott 56). In the United States, minority groups experience disproportionate levels of lead poisoning, industrial pollution, deteriorating housing, poverty, and infrastructure decline (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). People of color are the most likely live in polluted urban ghettos, work at the most dangerous jobs, and be exposed to toxic chemicals in their local environment—all of which contribute to severe health risks (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). Some of the most prevalent forms of illness occur from simply breathing the air. The toxins released from factories, freeways, and power plants cause those living nearby to develop higher rates of asthma, nasal congestion, respiratory tract inflammation, chest pains, and lung scarring (Bullard II). Poor minorities are exposed to the worst hazards, specifically in the southern United States. Home to the nation’s lowest education rates, incomes, and life expectancies, the Deep South is referred to as the nation’s “dumping zone” (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). Over 125 companies produce plastics, gasoline, paints, and fertilizer in Lower Mississippi’s Industrial Corridor, also known as “Cancer Alley” (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). Some of these southern states, including Louisiana, have given billions of dollars in tax breaks to petrochemical plants and ignored emission standards (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). Most of the residents of the Deep South are economically and politically powerless to change the status quo. Christians, and all people who enjoy the luxuries of industrial society, should recognize that environmental destruction does take an unfair human toll.

There is a distinctly unequal distribution of environmental hazards among humans. “Housing segregation and developmental patterns play a key role in determining where people live” (Bullard “Anatomy...”). Evidence suggests that the United States fosters an environmentally racist system, whether these are intentional decisions or unintentional neglect. Statistically, even when income is held constant, minority groups still carry a disproportionate amount of the environmental burden (Bullard “Anatomy...”). In the United States, 60 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in areas where two or more air pollutants exceed EPA standards, while only 33 percent of whites live in these areas (Bullard “Environmental

Justice...”). The asthma rate among African American children is 26 percent higher than that of white children (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). African Americans also suffer from the highest rates of lead and pesticide poisoning (Jones & Rainey 474). Overall, people of color are more likely to live in close proximity to industrial manufacturing facilities. For example, the graph below shows the disproportionate number of these facilities located in minority communities in Los Angeles County.



The causes of environmental racism relate to sociological factors. City zoning boards and planning commissions are usually comprised of white developers who make decisions that reflect their own interests. A study conducted by the *National Law Journal* states, “There is a racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters. White communities see faster action, better results, and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs “whether the community is wealthy or poor” (Bullard “Environmental Justice...”). Historically, our political

system has disempowered these marginalized groups, making them less likely to successfully protest the installation of an incinerator or other toxic facility in their neighborhoods. For these reasons, environmentalism is clearly a matter of justice and human rights. The primary principle of the environmental justice framework states that “all human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate for their health and well-being” (Nash 171). Christian communities should involve themselves in this movement as a part of their spiritual “commitment to justice, particularly for the poor and powerless” (Nash 164).

The future of the environmental movement centers on seeking environmental justice for humans. This shift is already beginning to take place. In the 1980s, working class minorities living in hazardous areas began to organize grassroots protests as a result of mainstream environmental organizations ignoring their needs (Jones & Rainey 474). It originally surprised activists, who sometimes considered environmentalism as a predominantly “white thing” (Jones & Rainey 474). In fact, those who are personally affected—those living in environmentally toxic areas—are starting to fight for justice at the local level. For example, in 2001 three hundred high school students congregated at South Gate High School in inner-city Los Angeles to convince their representatives not to build the 550-megawatt Nueva Azuela power plant in their community (Brodkin 2). The low-income, predominantly Latino immigrant city gained significant press coverage on the evening news (Brodkin 2). Students prepared speeches arguing that South Gate already had dangerous levels of toxins in the air with high rates of asthma and respiratory disease among residents (Brodkin 2). After a highly contentious political battle, the city council voted down the proposition in a referendum and essentially stopped the project (Brodkin 2). This is a truly inspirational example of local activism—these high school students were able to change environmental policy in the midst of one of California’s most severe power shortages (Brodkin 7). Like other civil rights movements, this movement will take the form of the “bottom up” approach by igniting desire for social and political change among the public. The movement will occur with the “loose alliance of grassroots, national environment, and civil rights leaders,” not the academic elite or regulatory agencies (Bullard).

### **Calling on the Past: Christianity and the Civil Rights Movement**

Some may wonder at this point, “How can the Christian community fit in with this movement?” Specifically in the United States, Christianity is particularly suited to defend this cause. Historically in the United States, Christians have taken a large role in representing and fighting for the poor and oppressed members of society. For example, Christian communities and religious leaders largely drove the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. typifies the heroic Christian leader of the movement. A proponent of nonviolent civil disobedience, he led the famous Montgomery bus boycott, won the Nobel Peace Prize, and inspired millions with his “I Have a Dream” speech. He founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization that would later reproduce similar protests in other regions of the South (Goodwin & Jasper 370). African American preachers joined the SCLC as a place to meet and plan, a centralizing body to pool funds, and a social network where tactics could be exchanged (Goodwin & Jasper 370). Whereas the NAACP sought to win crucial legal battles, the SCLC worked to change social ideology and mobilize the broader public (Goodwin & Jasper 371). “King’s SCLC simply was the civil rights movement in the late 1950s” (Goodwin & Jasper 371). The close web of church organizations successfully devised huge rallies, mass arrests, and marches.

This movement relied heavily on spiritual illumination to guide the movement and encourage believers. “Although organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) have been described as secularized waves of the civil rights movement, religious language saturated even the early literature of the youth movement” (Marsh 2). One such pamphlet wrote, “If we are of one blood, children of one common Father, brothers in the household of God, then we must be of equal worth in His family...” (Marsh 3). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to the activism as the “spiritual movement in Montgomery,” Clarence Jordan called it the “God-movement” in Georgia, and Fannie Lou Hamer proclaimed the “New Kingdom in Mississippi” (Marsh 206). The key element in the civil rights movement is that many protesters believed in their work as “redemption, reconciliation, and the creation of a beloved community” (Marsh 206). Similarly, the environmental movement can benefit from captivating this spiritual tone.

## **Conclusion**



The future of the earth is a human concern. It will require compassion and a certain level of knowledge for people to change their personal behaviors. As mentioned earlier, a significant portion of the United States' population remains disengaged and unaware of the consequences of environmental destruction. Many people have only indirect and impersonal experience with the environment, so they choose to assimilate into the dominant culture that fosters unsustainable living. They are immersed in an anthropocentric culture, one that has emphasized the superiority of humans over all other living things for centuries. Environmentalists grapple over how to make the public care about and become engaged in the movement.

After examining the background of the environmental movement, it is clear that it currently has several weaknesses. It is fragmented into a vast number of interests and goals, power is decentralized, and most importantly, it lacks a unifying ethical message that appeals to the broader public. The field of environmental ethics draws heavily upon biocentrism, which falls outside of mainstream cultural mentality. The most effective way to attract new members is to appeal to their anthropocentric interests. They must portray the environmental problem with a distinctly human orientation, emphasizing that environmental degradation unjustly hurts humans. The recent BP oil spill is a prime example to raise consciousness about the human impact of an ecological disaster. It also highlights the relationship between human welfare and our treatment of the earth. By rousing sympathy and concern for those who are affected, it opens the doors for further messages to inform the public about the environmental movement.

Already in our society we see the negative effects that environmental destruction has caused for humans. Visit the nearest barrio or urban ghetto and you will see the higher levels of pollution and smell the stale, toxic air. The dirtiest and most dangerous facilities are located in neighborhoods where the housing values are lowest—where the minorities, impoverished, and marginalized people reside. As a part of their mission for justice and mercy, the Christian community should support the environmental movement. The Biblical teachings of Christianity in particular reinforce the concept of sustainability as an expression of human love and obedience of God's will. Christians encourage caring for the weak, sick, and disadvantaged members of society—these same victims of environmental destruction. As we have seen with the civil rights movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faith communities offer the spiritual transformation,

strong community leadership, and a broad network of members that would ensure successes at the policy level. This movement will need strong roots within the community, where social change at the bottom will eventually lead to policy changes at the top. By focusing on the hearts and minds of the people, Christian communities have the potential to help the environmental movement.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I will use the definition of sustainability from the U.N. Brundtland Commission in 1983 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report). When talking about environmentalism or the environmental movement, I am specifically referring to the current political and social movement that attempts to bring environmental issues to the forefront of the national agenda and whose ultimate goal is to create a sustainable society.

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