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Title: Dueling Dualisms: Christian Theology in
Response to Global Climate Change

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**DUELING DUALISMS: CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY IN RESPONSE TO GLOBAL
CLIMATE CHANGE**

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Is global climate change a sign of the end times and the coming of Christ? Or perhaps it is a scientific fiction that a Christian God would never allow? Or is it a challenge that Christian teachings compel its followers to confront? Christian groups all over the world are grappling with these questions, and are doing creative theological work in the process. I will focus here on the attempts of two groups of Christians, progressives and evangelicals, to formulate theologies that are responsive to global climate change. First, I demonstrate how growing environmental degradation has prompted some Christians to abandon dualistic conceptions of God and the world, while others have turned towards longstanding dualist traditions. Second, I propose that there is nothing necessarily inherent in either the non-dualist progressive or dualist evangelical traditions that prevents them from effectively combating the causes of global climate change; *both* theologies are capable of mitigating climate change. Third, I illustrate how both theologies operate within a Christian narrative of creation, sin, and, and argue that this similarity constitutes an opportunity for cooperative action.

For the sake of expediency, I will first explain how I use the terms central to my argument. The phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change has often been referred to as global warming. “Global warming” has two significant relative strengths. First, it accurately denotes that the main effect of climate change is a warming of our atmosphere. Second, it suggests more dire consequences than the relatively neutral phrase “climate change”. Nonetheless, I prefer the term global climate change (GCC), because it more accurately communicates the range of consequences of the phenomenon. “Global warming”, in my eyes, obscures how human climate change has contributed to events like hurricanes, harsh winters, and radically fluctuating temperature patterns.

Additionally, the terms 'evangelical' and 'progressive' deserve some comment. While these terms can both refer to historically different groups and beliefs, in the context of this paper I will use 'progressive' to refer to non-dualist Christian theologies as those that argue that God is not distinct from or outside the universe. 'Evangelical' will refer to the specific Christian theologies that presuppose a transcendent God that exists distinct from creation and outside of the material universe.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

My analysis presupposes that theologies are not static summations of beliefs, but are affected by (and affect) the social context within which they exist. While there are numerous scholars whose work has contributed to such a view, the influence of the thinker Max Weber offers perhaps the most direct contributions to this theoretical background. Weber, especially in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argues that various protestant teachings informed many of the societal practices that underpinned capitalism (80). This view, that religious teachings have implications for spheres beyond the religious, is adopted in this paper as I analyze the implications of Christian teachings on environmental care and argue that religious worldviews impact how one approaches material conditions like GCC.

Additionally, this paper will emulate William Schweiker's construction of a religious humanist method in the study of religion. For Schweiker, religious inquiry and academic study do not constitute two separate, unrelated spheres of knowledge. Refuting this assumption, he writes, "Positions that once were adversaries can now be seen to be engaged in multidimensional inquiry that may and must help to refashion one's

intellectual venture” (145). This simple starting point, that both religious thought and academic study can and do affect each other, leads Schweiker to his central thesis: that the goal of religious study ought to be to maximize the humanist impulses within religious traditions. According to him, “the normative aim of the field... must be to aid in the articulation and reconstruction of religious outlooks in order that they might serve their own most humane expression” (137). In other words, academics should not sacrifice ethical judgments in favor of objective, dispassionate analysis. Instead, they should seek to identify and accentuate humanist, just theologies that exist within religious traditions. This is the work that I seek to do in my analysis. I will compare the progressive and evangelical theologies with the goal of identifying each position’s strengths in combating the causes of GCC and suggesting possible avenues for cooperative action.

This approach is not without its own drawbacks and obstacles. One could easily object that it is presumptuous to constructively criticize religious traditions from the position of the academy. This is a fair objection: at its worst, the religious humanist approach could promote xenophobic polemic against traditions that are perceived as “dangerous” or “backwards.” In recent times, this sort of scholarship has manifested itself most clearly in arguments about the inherent violent tendencies within Islam.¹ Scholars looking to avoid this sort of pointed polemic often endorse a more dispassionate analysis that seeks to observe and understand rather than criticize and change. Even in the face of this legitimate criticism, I believe that the religious humanist approach is

¹ For an example of this approach, see Samuel P. Huntington’s *Clash of the Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. In the book, Huntington argues that the West and “Islamic Civilization” are headed towards an inevitable confrontation. He writes, “The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power” (217).

better suited for the type of analysis that I propose. If one accepts Schweiker's supposition that religious and academic thought do not constitute two separate spheres of knowledge, then the objection of academics inappropriately injecting an "outside" view is mitigated. Both groups are producing knowledge that is embedded in a historical, social context, and thus neither group can claim a monopoly on commenting on their material effects. Additionally, many modern thinkers have demonstrated the fallacy of believing that one's academic analysis *can* be removed from one's ideological starting points.² They argue that, whether or not a scholar's biases are made explicit, they are likely to color her conclusions. Finally, one can deploy a religious humanist method while rejecting the sort of hubris that would lead one to wholeheartedly denounce an entire religious tradition. Instead, it is possible to identify instances respectfully when a tradition has contributed towards a more just society, and analyze those instances in ways that aid modern thinkers with similar goals.³

Literature Review

While much has been written about the relationship between environmentalism and Christianity, my review of the literature reveals that the analysis that I set out to do has not yet been done. The relevant literature tends to fall into at least two salient categories: First, analyses of the material effects of Christians in regards to environmentalism, which often pay special attention to the political power wielded by

² Jonathan Z. Smith's *Drudgery Design* is an example of this analysis applied to religious studies. Specifically, he argues that an anti-Catholic Bias has colored many scholarly works concerning early Christianity.

³ Similarly, this methodological approach allows for a considered criticism of instances when a tradition has produced great injustices.

Christian groups, and second, theological analyses of Christianity, identifying ways that theological doctrine has either supported or denigrated efforts to curtail GCC.

Recent national elections and renewed discourse concerning “moral majorities” and the “religious right” have prompted scholars to analyze the meaning of Christianity for American political activity, including environmental issues like GCC. Some of these works, including Ronald J. Sider’s *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*, review the state of contemporary evangelical politics and offers constructive criticism for the future.⁴ In his book, he offers a short history of evangelical political engagement (beginning with the ascendance of Jerry Falwell and the election of Ronald Reagan) that culminates in a criticism of evangelical leadership for failing to produce a document that succinctly summarizes evangelical Christians’ political beliefs. This failure, in his eyes, facilitates internal confusion and ad-hoc political engagement. As such, the majority of his work is focused on creating a document for Evangelical political engagement, including sections on evangelical environmental care. Other works, such as Ray Suarez’s *Holy Vote*, take a more journalistic approach; Suarez examines a number of contemporary political issues in hopes of revealing a complex and nuanced view of evangelical politics. For example, when writing about evangelicals and the environment, Suarez uses interviews with religious leaders to reveal the ways that evangelicals have both supported and opposed pro-environmental policies. In general though, these works focus on the political implications of Christian belief and not the theological differences that promote different Christian responses in the first place.

⁴ Jim Wallis’ *God’s Politics* follows a similar format, arguing that status quo evangelical political engagement has shifted too far towards the right and in response to this perceived problem, offers a template for future evangelical engagement

The anthology *Creaturely Theology* offers a sterling example of modern theologians reevaluating Christian doctrine in light of environmental degradation. While it focuses on issues related to non-human animals, the anthology offers a cross section of the strategies modern theologians are using to approach their faith with environmental concerns in mind. Some essays, like Christopher Southgate's "The new Days of Noah?: Assisted Migration as an Ethical Imperative in an Era of Climate Change" search for ideas already present in established doctrine and scriptural texts that would be helpful for confronting contemporary environmental issues. Other essays, like Dennis Edwards' "The Way of the Flesh: Rethinking the Imago Dei", take a more radical approach. Edwards argues that the traditional doctrine of the *Imago Dei* (that humans have been made in the image of God) has historically lead to inhumane relationships with non-humans, and should be scrapped in favor of a doctrine of the flesh based on John 1:14 ("...logos became flesh and dwelt among us") and the writings of Paul. This range of theological approaches widens to an even greater degree when it comes to the issue of GCC. Some theologians argue that Christianity as presently and traditionally constituted is well equipped to respond to GCC, while others argue that radical re-interpretations are needed. Because I discuss these theological responses at length throughout this paper, I will not dwell on them here. Suffice to say here that none of them, to my knowledge, engages in a thorough "meta" analysis of the divide between those who desire radical reinterpretations and those who defend traditional theologies. It is to this analysis that I now turn.

Two Christian Theologies

For some, growing environmental degradation and the subsequent possibility of human extinction are problems ‘for’ and ‘to’ Christianity: ‘For’, in the sense that it is a problem that a motivated Christian community could mitigate⁵ and ‘to’ in the sense that it challenges some of the most basic tenets of Christian theology. For example, Gordon Kaufman, a progressive Christian theologian, explains how a human-created apocalypse is troubling to a Christian religious world-view. For Kaufman, the possibility of anthropogenic extinction wrestles sovereignty away from the traditional conception of God (5). According to Kaufman, the possibility of starting or ending human existence on earth is a power that has traditionally been reserved for the divine (5). In our contemporary historical context, this is no longer the case. Humans have gained the ability to bring about extinction on their own, necessitating theological reorientations⁶.

Given the perceived need to formulate a theology that is responsive to the modern age, Kaufman and other progressive Christians developed methods for constructing new Christian theologies. In an effort to avoid essentializing all progressive Christians, however, I will focus solely on the work of Sallie McFague as a case study. While there are many writers who criticize dualism in Christian theology, McFague is notable for her extensive work on non-dualist Christian theology in the context of global climate change. For her, theology speaks in a language of metaphors (109). In other words, when theologians make religious claims, they are really constructing worldviews that function hypothetically (109). Take for example the claim that God is omniscient. McFague

⁵ Additionally, some have argued that Christians have a special responsibility to mitigate Global climate change because of the ways that Christianity has historically contributed to the causes of GCC.

⁶ While Gordon Kaufman is writing in the context of nuclear destruction, he would later write that a large-scale ecological disaster (such as GCC) also constitutes an anthropogenic extinction possibility in his book *In Face of Mystery*.

would argue that this claim is most productive when it is not taken literally, but instead understood as a possibility. In other words, it ought to provoke questions like “How would I live my life differently if God were omniscient? Would this be better than my status quo world view?” Thus, McFague sees theology not as a descriptive activity, but as constructive thought that ought to be judged based on its ability to create a more just community.

So what then, does the content of this theology look like? McFague begins with a discussion of the nature of human beings. Specifically, she believes that human beings are *ecological*, meaning that we are radically connected with the rest of creation in a dynamic ecosystem (45-49). She contrasts this understanding that with individualistic conceptions of humanity. According to these latter strains of thought, humans are by nature selfish, greedy, attempting to maximize their own profit even at the expense of their fellow human beings (43-44). In contrast to this view, McFague argues that there is nothing inherent in the nature of humans that causes one to act selfishly (44). Instead, it is possible to conceive humans as a part of a larger whole, in which each of the parts contributes to the functioning of the greater system (58). McFague writes that this concept of humanity, “reminds us that instead of being the center of creation, we are from moment to moment dependent on all that is” (58).

Following this analysis of humanity, McFague moves towards developing a theological account of the Divine. Provocatively, she suggests that God is best conceived of as the “body” of the world (72). This is a complicated idea that deserves some unpacking. For God to be the body of the world means that there is an intimate

connection between the mundane and the divine (73).⁷ This idea is proposed in opposition to worldviews that see the material universe as deficient in comparison to God's transcendent Glory. Instead, she writes, "meeting is not a momentary 'spiritual' affair; rather, God is the ether, the reality, the body, the garden in which we live" (76). In other words, she believes that while God does have mysterious transcendent qualities that can never be understood, the material world acts as a "reflection" of those qualities (76). In this way, God is not a being that can only be encountered after death or in spiritual meditation; God is instead thought of as the body that we live within (113-114).

For McFague, this worldview holds several advantages over other traditional accounts of the God/World relationship. Primarily, she sees other accounts of the relationship as de-centering the importance of the material world (79). In her eyes, viewing God as an incorporeal being situated in a non-material realm deemphasizes the need to take care of the immediate mundane (79). Furthermore, she believes that when the mundane is considered within the transcendent model, it is done so in an inadequate way. She writes, "at most, nature enters this model only as the king's [God's] "realm" or "dominion," not with all the complexity, richness, and attention-grabbing qualities of the living, mysterious creation of which we are a part (69). The model of God as the body of the world, on the other hand, invites contemplation about how we can care for the divine body. Instead of focusing on the far-off otherworldly possibilities of existence, "It focuses attention on the near, on the neighbor, on the earthly meeting God not later in heaven but here and now" (73). It is not difficult to see why McFague would argue that this model is more responsive to global climate change (73). Climate Change is a

⁷ The term 'world' referring to the entire universe, rather than simply the planet earth.

phenomenon that necessitates action on earth; reducing greenhouse emissions, curtailing deforestation, and adapting to the effects of climate change are all behaviors that necessitate a focus on our world.

McFague also sees the non-dualistic model as facilitating the inter-connected, ecological view of humanity. Recognizing that the earth is one “body” brings home the point that the whole cannot function without functioning parts, and vice-versa (75-76). This argument makes sense: the metaphor of the “body” brings to mind the biological functioning of human and non-human animal bodies. In this way, just as a human body cannot function without a healthy heart, the body of the earth cannot function without a healthy climate. Understood as such, this model requires us to act as “interrelational, interdependent beings who live in total dependence on the others who compose the body...” (76). McFague thus sees her theological account of God as reinforcing her ideal conception of human beings.

A final feature of McFague’s theology that deserves some comment is her provocative discussion on the relationship between God and humanity. Traditionally, God has been conceived as a force over which humans have little power; certainly humans may be able to affect God’s behavior through prayer, but by and large God has power over humans, and not vice-versa (77). This dynamic changes if one accepts McFague’s non-dualistic account of God and the world. If God is embodied in the material world, we humans become “partners” with God in the care of creation (77-78). Partnership with God is important for McFague’s theology: it devalues solutions to environmental problems that put excessive stock in waiting for a divine intervention or claiming that the problem itself is God’s will. Instead, we are invited to conceive of

environmental problems as problems toward which we ourselves have contributed, and for which we ourselves can seek a solution (78).

McFague is not the only theologian to construct a theology in the face of growing environmental degradation, nor is her approach exclusive. Christian evangelicals have also formulated theologies that by contrast adhere more closely to traditional conceptions of Christian doctrine. While there are many examples of this approach, I will focus on the *Declaration of Christian Care of Creation*. This declaration was the product of the Evangelical Environment Network, an organization that seeks to educate and provide resources for Christians that wish to take action to care for the environment (par. 1). First published in 1994, the *Declaration* has since been approved by hundreds of church leaders (Brandt 94). Due to its relative ubiquity and its succinct statement of beliefs, the *Declaration* stands as a rich resource for those who wish to examine the philosophical underpinnings of evangelical care of the environment.

This document stands in sharp contrast to McFague's non-dualist theology, both in its content and in the method of its formulation. Unlike theology as "imaginative construction", an approach exemplified by Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague, the Evangelical Environment Network describes itself as a "biblically orthodox" organization (FAQ Sec. 4). While this phrase is somewhat vague, a reading of the organization's website clarifies that the Network places much more stock in the ultimate authority of scripture than McFague or Kaufman. In opposition to their constructivist approach to theology, the Evangelical Environment Network views scripture as the primary revelation of the divine, and as such treats sacred texts as the foundation of what its members understand as authoritative interpretation rather than construction.

Following this method, the *Declaration* argues that we have a responsibility to care for God's creation, referring multiple times to the role of humans as "stewards" of the environment (91). The rhetoric of stewardship has its roots in the book of Genesis, specifically the first creation story (Gen. 1:3-2:4). In this story, God creates the universe sequentially, beginning with light and dark and culminating with the creation of humanity (Gen. 1:1-26). The most relevant passage reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:26). Instead of interpreting these passages to mean that humans have a right to plunder the earth for their own needs, the *Declaration* argues that that stewardship, properly understood, means that we have a responsibility to care for the earth. It states:

Our God-given, stewardly talents have often been warped from their intended purpose: that we know, name, keep, and delight in God's creatures; that we nourish civilization in love, creativity, and obedience to God; and that we offer creation and civilization back in praise to the creator. We have ignored our creaturely limits and have used the earth with greed, rather than care (91).

The *Declaration* employs a couple of strategies to square the conclusion that we are stewards of the environment with the dominion passage in Genesis. One such strategy is the argument that dominion actually implies stewardship of the earth. R.J. Berry, a supporter of the *Declaration*, argues that when viewed in its proper historical context, dominion ought to be understood as beneficent stewardship (20). According to

him, dominion would have referred to a sovereign/subject relationship, and a good king would be understood as one who acts kindly towards and cares for his subjects (20). As such, dominion sounds less like an invitation to plunder, and more like a responsibility to care for creation (20). This is just one example of how green evangelicals use biblical scripture to justify their environmental claims.

The *Declaration* also draws heavily on other scriptural passages to support its thesis that we ought to care for God's creation. Notably, the *Declaration* makes a strong argument for the value of all creatures, not just humans. To formulate this argument, it draws on passages in Genesis where God declares all of creation good, and Christian Bible passages that state that Jesus will "reconcile all things to himself" (Gen. 1:31, Col. 1:120). In this way, the framers of the document make the case that animals are useful beyond their instrumental value to humans (91). While this may sound like a relatively pedestrian claim, it actually refers to a debate ongoing in the field of environmental ethics for decades. Some theologians and philosophers argue for an environmental theory that views animals as valuable only in their usefulness to humans; they build arguments for preservation based on their environmental and aesthetic benefits (Norton 165). For others, such a utilitarian strategy bleeds too easily into exploitation, as the destruction of animals can often yield short-term benefits for humans (165). For its part, the *Declaration* comes down firmly on the side of viewing other creatures as valuable in their own right because they were created by God as good, absent the use they provide to humans.

Additionally, the *Declaration* suggests specific ways Christians might live their lives in ways that do less harm to the environment. For one thing, the authors of this

declaration claim that it is important for Christians to educate themselves about God's creation. The *Declaration* states, "... we seek to understand what creation reveals about God's divinity... and what creation teaches us of its God-given order and principles by which it works" (90). In other words, when we learn about creation, not only do we improve our ability to care for the environment, but we also deepen our understanding of God. This provides a dual justification for Christians to familiarize themselves with the environment. Additionally, the *Declaration* calls for Christians to live in a sustainable, restrained lifestyle. In order to support this directive, the *Declaration* draws upon the figure of Jesus Christ as an example of meek living that rejects abundance and wastefulness (93).

Up to this point, my description *Declaration of Christian Care of Creation* may sound an awful lot like the theology formulated by Sallie McFague. Indeed, both are Christian theologies that seek to combat growing environmental degradation. They do, however, differ in significant ways. Most notably, the *Declaration* flatly rejects that God can be thought of as solely immanent or mundane. It states:

Our creating God is prior to and other than creation, yet intimately involved with it, upholding each thing in its freedom, and all things in relationships of intricate complexity. God is transcendent, while lovingly sustaining each creature; and immanent, while *wholly* other than creation and not to be confused with it (italics added for emphasis) (91).

In this way, the document emphatically denies the possibility that God could be identified as body with the material order. Certainly, it states that some aspects of God are immanent, but it is silent on the question of how God can be thought of as immanent. In the context of the rest of the declaration, it seems that God is immanent in the sense that God is *involved* with the natural world, not the sense that God *constitutes* the natural world. A look at the organization's website clarifies this view. It states:

As a biblically orthodox Christian organization EEN totally rejects nature worship and pantheism. Nothing is clearer in Scripture: we are to worship only the Creator - never His creation. There is only one God in three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - to whom all praise, glory, and honor are to be given (FAQ, Sec. 4)

The *Declaration* explicitly rejects McFague's central thesis in favor of a dualistic theology in which God and creation are separate and wholly other.

Disagreements and Conflicts

In spite of the obvious agreement that Christians should take actions to mitigate GCC, there has been much disagreement between the two groups. I argue that those intra-religious disputes notwithstanding, both sides have formulated a workable Christian response to GCC. To support my claims, I will first review the criticism of dualism by authors like McFague. For progressive Christians, much of the impetus to reject dualism is born out of the belief that a dualist theology is incapable of responding ethically to

material challenges and in fact motivated many of them. McFague identifies two ways in which dualist theologies support environmental degradation: First, dualism encourages an individualistic theological anthropology that prevents concern for global concerns. Second, it promotes a concern with a spiritual realm over concern for the mundane.

McFague writes, "...Christianity... has through its individualistic view of human life supported the neoclassical economic paradigm, the current consumer culture, which... is a major cause of global warming" (85). This is a lofty criticism, and it deserves some explanation. According to her, our conceptions of God inform our understanding of who we are as humans. Specifically, she argues that dualism between God and the earth leads to the conclusion that we humans are essentially "on our own" (31). Furthermore, when we conceptualize ourselves as isolated from God, McFague contends that we are more likely to take actions that assert our superiority towards the rest of creation. In other words, we fail to see the interconnected nature of the world, and as such respond to our material predicament by focusing on supporting ourselves as individuals.

The second related criticism that McFague raises is that dualism implicitly promotes a hierarchy that privileges the spiritual over the material. This in turn supports the de-emphasis of mundane concerns like GCC. In other words, if there exists a superior spiritual realm that we might eventually be able to access (i.e. popular conceptions of heaven), then it might make sense to focus overwhelmingly on reaching that realm at the expense of addressing the needs of a material order. Furthermore, she suggests that this sort of dualism may also promote a sort of contempt for the world. She writes, "[dualism]...encourages an understanding of salvation as the escape of

individuals to the spiritual world “ (65). In this way, a Christian dualism could support a representation of the material world as a sort of prison that we must tolerate until we are ultimately freed to the spiritual realm. If this representation were dominant, then it would be difficult to see how dualism could motivate action in the face of GCC; what is the point of saving a world that is constraining our ideal state of being?

While these criticisms rightly demonstrate some of the historical failings of Christian dualism, I believe that they are by and large misguided. First, I argue that her criticisms place too much blame on traditional conceptions of Christianity. The underlying causes of GCC are complex and multifaceted: to single out dualist Christianity as a major cause of the ideologies that motivate GCC simply ignores many of the nuances and complexities of the phenomenon. As Michael S. Northcott points out “environmental historians point to the rise of modern science and technology, to the growth of industrial methods of productions, and to a global market in natural resources and manufacturers as key causative elements in the crisis” (33). Is it possible that elements of a dualistic Christianity have exacerbated all these alternate causalities by promoting selfish individualism? Perhaps, but to posit that Christianity is the underlying ideology through which all these other factors are filtered does not pay respect to the full complexity of either GCC or Christianity. Mono-causal theories of complicated phenomena are rarely accurate, and in this case it places an unfair amount of blame on Christians and Christianity.

Additionally, there are many elements of a Dualistic Christian theology that allow for effective responses to global climate change. One such element is a workable critique of human arrogance. When God is posited as a supernatural and perfect creator, and we

as imperfect material beings, it becomes easy to criticize human actions that dramatically alter God's creation. This criticism is especially effective in the face of GCC, a phenomenon that may represent the ultimate human mismanagement of the environment. According to some thinkers, it is precisely the attempt to manage the world such that it conforms to human ideals (i.e. easier access to resources) that is at the root of modern environmental degradation. According to this strain of thought, a "technological" worldview that sees the world as a collection of resources to be used is the root of the current environmental crisis. Philosopher Tad Beckman states the argument thusly:

It is no wonder that we have "ethical problems" with our environment because the whole concept of the environment has been profoundly transformed. A major portion of the environment in which modern Westerners live, today, is the product of human fabrication and this makes it ever more difficult for us to discover a correct relationship with that portion of the environment that is still given to us. It is all there to be taken, to be manipulated, to be used and consumed, it seems (Sec. 4 Par. 2).

A dualist theology has the possibility of criticizing this worldview, as it gives us the tools to criticize human mismanagement as an affront to the designs of a wholly other and perfect creator.

A second related strength of the dualist position is its ability to promote a kind of solidarity with the rest of creation. A created material world viewed as wholly separate from God can promote a sort of human connection with the rest of creation, a sense that "we're all in this together", thus emphasizing the ecological nature of our world. In other

words, dualism between God and earth does not inherently bleed into a dualism between humanity and the rest of creation. As sociologist Szerszynski writes, “when dualistic distinctions are made in a tradition, and are linked together metaphorically, they don’t necessarily operate as a fixed grid of correspondences” (69). In this way, a theory of mutual interdependence is not mutually exclusive with a dualist theology. It is possible for humans to be united with non-human nature in their otherness to God, and in that unity come to care strongly for non-human creation. This argument becomes especially strong in the context of arguments for intrinsic value, as humans and non-humans can be seen as sharing in the transcendent God’s approval.

Finally, even if non-dualists are right in their contention that traditional dualist conceptions of Christianity make consideration of non-humans difficult, there is ample support for mitigating global climate change out of the concern for humans. Paula Clifford, head of theology for the organization Christian Aid, is a strong proponent of this approach. According to her, it is possible to avoid the contentious debate over stewardship altogether by focusing on the effects that global climate change has had on human communities. For her, GCC transcends environmental concerns. It is a development issue, in that it affects vulnerable poor communities and frustrates their ability to achieve sustainable, rewarding lifestyles (177). Additionally, it is a justice issue, because it is disproportionately caused by the wealthy, and the poor disproportionately feel its effects (177). Once she establishes that GCC is already devastating some human communities, she begins to determine a theological basis for a response. Primarily, she draws on the idea that all of humanity is “one” in Christ (178). She writes, “If we are all one in Christ, then that one-ness demands a just and loving

relationship both with our fellow human beings and with God. When a human relationship is flawed or broken, our relationship with God is also impaired” (178). For Clifford, the redeeming and uniting power of Christ promotes just human relationships, and in doing so challenges the selfish behavior that exacerbates GCC. In this way, aspects of New Testament Christology can motivate Christian action on GCC, whether or not God is conceived of as an immanent or transcendent force (179).

There has also been a fair amount of criticism of immanentist theologies leveled by those who support more traditional Christian theologies. The loudest of these criticisms is that an immanent God is incompatible with orthodox Christian doctrine. Most writers launch this criticism based on two related arguments: First, that an immanent God obscures Christ’s soteriological function. According to this argument, God became incarnate in the human body of Jesus Christ. To say that God has always been a physical presence in the world de-emphasizes the role of Christ. Forwarding this argument, theologian Gillian McCulloch writes, “The notion of divine power being mediated through Christ is effectively rendered meaningless in this perspective, here the individual is by nature sufficiently equipped to rise to the battle to save the planet...” (126). In other words, McCulloch’s understanding of immanentist Christian theologies is that a special relationship with Christ is no longer necessary; rather, the ability to achieve salvation is inherent in every individual. Theologian Daphne Hampson suggests that this is enough to exclude McFague’s theology from Christianity. She writes, “Is it Christian?... It could not be counted as such. Jesus is not unique” (158).

The second argument is that an immanent God cannot reflect the distinctions in the Christian trinity, the “three distinctive modes of being subsisting in their mutual

relations: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (McCulloch 110). Some Christian thinkers fear that McFague’s God is so all-encompassing that there is little room to make distinctions within her conception of the divine. Specifically, if different aspects of the trinity have different degrees of immanence, then how can a God that is radically immanent account for these differences? As McCulloch writes, “McFague removes the personal categories of the traditional Trinitarian formula, and consequently their exclusive activities in creation with regard to divine providence, redemption, and sanctification.” (113). So, immanentist theologies have been criticized not only for their perceived failure to maintain the soteriological importance of Christ, but also for the broader difficulties of imagining a triune God.

These criticisms, however, are not insurmountable. Primarily, I argue that these criticisms assume an immutable and unchanging essence of Christianity, rather than a diverse group of religious communities. Since the earliest days of Christianity, there have existed contentious debates about what constitutes orthodox Christianity. Bart Erhman, a historian of Christianity, illustrates some of this diversity in writing, “In the second and third centuries there were Christians who believed that Jesus was both divine and human... There were other Christians who argued that he was completely divine... There were others who insisted that Jesus was a full flesh-and-blood human” (2). These theological disputes have never been neatly resolved. Much of Christian history has been fraught with tense and sometimes violent disputes over what constitutes “orthodox” Christianity, with the charge of heretic being deployed frequently. This diversity continues to exist today, reflected by the thousands of distinct Christian denominations that exist throughout the world (Benz Sec. 2. Par. 3). Thus, when one considers the

enormous diversity that has existed across Christian communities, the criticism that McFague is not “Christian” seems to be based on a particular understanding of Christianity, rather than a specific communal consensus on “correct” Christianity.

One might object that there must be *some* criteria by which a theology could be determined to be Christian. Without any, we would be unable to make any claims about what did not constitute Christianity, and the term itself could lose its meaning.

Nevertheless, I argue that it is preferable to speak of the *degree* to which a theology does or does not correspond to canonical Christian doctrine rather than making totalizing claims about whether it is or isn’t a Christian theology. This approach is able to account for the vast diversity of beliefs and practices among Christian groups and resists the tendency to dismiss a theology based on its perceived otherness. Additionally, it allows for greater respect of the autonomy of those who identify as Christian, even when their version of Christianity might seem alien and strange. For these reasons, to exclude McFague’s theology from the umbrella of Christianity on the basis of its deviation from popular Christian doctrine is not a productive criticism.

Most importantly, these criticisms ignore the work McFague does to incorporate Trinitarian and Christological concepts into her theology. For her, Jesus is an immensely important figure, as a symbol of the incarnated nature of God. She writes, “The story of Jesus Christ is the story of God incarnate, facing the worst that the world (human beings) can offer... and rising to new life” (171-2). For McFague, Jesus Christ represents God’s incarnation in the world, and the triumph of goodness in the face of human wickedness. Jesus Christ reminds us not only that God is among us in this world, but also that human evil is surmountable; that in spite of oppression and injustice in the world all is not lost.

The story of Jesus Christ clearly takes on an elevated importance in the context of GCC, with the phenomenon being so widespread that the situation can sometimes seem hopeless.

Furthermore, Jesus' death is not without soteriological importance. While McFague rejects the narrative in which Jesus dies so that God's mind changes about humanity, she nonetheless embraces the idea that Jesus' death was a powerful and meaningful event. For her:

Jesus did not live in order to die; rather he died in order to live— in order that all of us might see a new way to live. His suffering was in order to open our eyes to the way of the cross, the way in which we all must live so that creation flourishes. The death of Jesus says to us that living in solidarity with others... is the only way to live (39).

For McFague, Jesus' death carries immense importance. It is a message that life is best lived in service with others, rather than in pursuit of individual and selfish agendas. Granted, this version of the passion narrative is divorced from many of the mystical and supernatural elements present in popular accounts (such as doctrines of Atonement); still, it demonstrates that McFague's theology does not reject the importance of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, McFague incorporates an account of the Holy Spirit into her work. For McFague, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of God: a sustaining power of love which pulses through the world and sustains all that is. She writes, "There is one reality: God visible (body) and invisible (spirit), but the latter is known *through* the former. Everything is

suffused, infused, with God's breath and light and power" (163). In this way, the Holy Spirit clarifies McFague's radical immanence: while it is true that the only ways we can "know" God are through the world and the humanity of Jesus, there is an aspect of God that is invisible and spiritual, the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is imbued with pragmatic significance as well. For McFague the Holy Ghost drives the continued belief that the world is redeemable. For her, it is a reminder that we humans are not alone on this planet, left to manage the planet for our own ends. Rather, there is some purpose for our being in the world, a purpose that is reflected by the sustaining goodness and love of God.

In short, the two criticisms leveled between evangelical and progressive Christians— that the former can't *really* be environmental, and that the latter can't *really* be Christian— reveal a misunderstanding of each position. In the case of the criticism of evangelical theologies, while it is possible that historically these formations of Christianity may have contributed towards the attitudes that support global climate change, it makes little sense to tie transcendent Christianity to the past in a mono-causal and essentialized manner. Today, there are many theologians who approach global climate change from their perspective of traditional Christianity, and they have formulated a number of creative theological responses. Similarly, the criticism that an immanentist theology is mutually exclusive with Christianity mistakenly identifies a concrete division between Christian and non-Christian traditions, and ignores the work theologians like McFague have done to incorporate traditional Christian doctrines. Understood in light of this critique both theologies have the potential to be effective Christian theologies that motivate action to mitigate GCC. For this reason, the question

is less one of which theology is preferable, than how to maximize cooperation between these two Christian groups. It is to this question that I now turn.

Maximizing Cooperation

The first step may be for both camps to realize that neither position is as alien or extreme as it is often portrayed. Historically, misunderstandings between the two positions have contributed to lack of action on environmental issues. Evangelical writer David Gushee, in his book *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center*, claims that evangelicals have been hesitant to join environmental movements based on their association with new age and eco-feminist theologies, and the subsequent fear that environmentalism necessitates the worship of some sort of earth spirit (250). Similarly, it is not hard to imagine that the association of dualist Christian theology with unchecked exploitation of the environment has deterred some progressives from vigorously pursuing cooperation with evangelical Christians on issues like global climate change. If it is true that historical misunderstandings and misrepresentations have presented barriers to cooperation, one strategy for increasing cooperation could be pursuing areas of overlap and agreement as springboards for further discussion. In this section, I argue that both groups operate within a Christian narrative of creation, sin and repair⁸.

Both groups use the language of creation to speak about the value of nature, and in doing so present intrinsic and instrumental arguments for valuing nature. As discussed previously, the *Declaration* draws on Genesis passages to affirm that the environment is

⁸ While different theologians have articulated this narrative in a multitude of different ways, most basically it holds that God has created a good world, humans have sinned, and that redemption is possible.

intrinsically valued; God says “it is good” conferring independent value to non-human nature. Similarly, McFague cites this passage and writes, “God does not say that creation is good for himself or for human beings but simply that it is good” (112). Both positions go beyond the goodness of nature in and of itself and clarify the ways that Creation is good for humans. Specifically, both McFague and the authors of the *Declaration* claim that creation ought to be valued for its ability to spiritually enrich human lives.

According to the *Declaration* it is important to “seek to understand what creation reveals about God’s divine sustaining presence, and everlasting order” (90). In other words, we ought to preserve the environment, because from the environment we can learn more about the force that created the environment, enriching our own spiritual understandings of the universe. McFague defends a similar sentiment, writing, “if one can say that the basic religious apprehension is the wonder at being, wonder that there is something rather than nothing, then the ecological, evolutionary sensibility is in this sense religious...” (186). Both theological positions, then, endorse the view that meditation on the material universe can be religiously meaningful and rewarding both for humans and for the preservation of the environment.

These representations of value through creation present an excellent opportunity for cooperative action. First, they promote a deeper understanding of the material universe, and with it a greater ecological literacy. Both positions encourage an understanding of our environment at a deeper level as a means to understand God better. Additionally, this sort of deeper understanding of the environment also yields benefits for changing behaviors that contribute to GCC. Recall that for McFague, the belief that humans exist independent of non-human nature encourages an arrogant and exploitive

attitude. Encouraging study of the environment as a kind of reverence towards God could go far in correcting this attitude. Additionally, the argument that non-human nature is to be valued for the benefits it confers to humans is an important one to be able to make, and these two positions have the tools to make it in a sophisticated manner. For those who are unconvinced by arguments about the intrinsic value of nature, both positions provide strong and nuanced arguments for the preservation of nature for humanity's sake⁹. In this way, each has strong strategies for promoting the repair of the environment that flow from their understandings of creation and goodness.

The dualist and non-dualist positions also share an account of human sin. Sallie McFague argues that sin is best conceived as an action that is more than just individual. She writes, "Sin is public and economic; it is not just private and sexual" (38). In other words, McFague believes that sin is not simply a description of our private, individual indiscretions, but also of the actions that contribute to large injustices. For example, even though a small act of pollution, such as needlessly wasting energy, may not have a significant impact in and of itself, it is still a sinful behavior. Thus, for McFague, sin means to do something that would harm the whole for the sake of the part; to choose profit over non-pollution, expediency over environmentalism. While the *Evangelical Declaration of Care* does not go as far in constructing a theological account of sin, it implicitly embraces a similar viewpoint. It states: "The earthly result of human sin has been a perverted stewardship... an unjust denial of God's bounty to other human beings"

⁹ For a more detailed defense of this approach to environmental protection see Edward Norton's "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism". Norton argues that while strong anthropocentrism (the worldview that holds that the environment is only valuable for the immediate benefits to humans it provides) easily bleeds into exploitation and destruction, weak anthropocentrism (a worldview that considers the environment useful to humans for reasons beyond its immediate economic benefits) would criticize nearly all of the same actions that a theory of intrinsic value would.

and that “creation is suffering from the consequences of human sin”. For the authors of the declaration as well, then, sin is an activity that contributes to larger environmental injustices and degradations. As such, it is an area ripe to be explored cooperatively.

Beyond merely serving as an area of overlap, doctrines of sin could be effectively employed by both sides to motivate Christian action on GCC. Specifically, some doctrines of sin effectively challenge human ambivalence towards global climate change. McFague, drawing on Pauline theology, writes, “Paul... called himself a wretched man because he knew the good, but didn’t necessarily do it.” (153). For her then, sin often has the character of knowingly choosing to do something that is wrong (153). This account of sin applies to many of those who contribute disproportionately to GCC: even though many know that actions like driving large vehicles or excessively warming one’s house contribute to GCC, they embrace the status quo because it is easier and more comfortable than the alternative (153). Attentiveness to these accounts of sin effectively incorporates a denouncement of the “small” things most people do that contribute to GCC and affect the public as a whole. Both groups then, are able to effectively criticize these types of behavior as they hold that even actions that seem commonplace can be religious transgressions.

As different as these two positions often regard each other to be, it is clear that they both fit into an overarching narrative of creation, sin, and repair. I do not suggest that these two positions are essentially “the same,” and that any differences that exist between them are merely superficial. On the contrary, there are very real differences and disputes that exist between progressive non-dualist Christians and dualist Evangelicals. What I do argue, however, is that it serves the goals of neither group when these disputes

get in the way of concrete cooperation. United action would demonstrate to policymakers and laypeople alike that global climate change is an issue that many Christians care deeply about. To achieve this sort of cooperation requires setting aside these disputes, however deep, and shedding the misunderstandings that have encouraged polemics instead of cooperation. Christian theologian David A.S. Ferguson writes that conflicts over the immanent or transcendent nature of God constitutes “the most significant fault-line in contemporary Christian theology” (96). Transcending this “fault-line” will not be easy, but focusing on issues of relative agreement presents an excellent place to start.

Conclusions

Global climate change, and the environmental degradation that has preceded it, have engendered new debates within the Christian community: Can a dualist theology account for ecological destruction? Can a non-dualist theology really be considered Christian? I have argued these are the wrong questions to ask, as they focus on the limitations of each position rather than facilitating common action to curtail the causes of global climate change. Rather, I have suggested that the two groups focus on areas of commonality as an approach to maximizing cooperation. This analysis has led me to two conclusions about the nature of theology itself. First, the example of Christians and GCC demonstrates with force the idea that theology ought not be considered a static activity that takes place absent material concerns. Even groups that consider themselves “biblically orthodox,” such as the Environmental Defense Network, have reframed many of their theological principles in response to a changing world. Thus, theology formed

through intense interplay between practitioners of a religion and the material conditions of the world around them. Second, while we often speak of interfaith conflicts and disputes, it is also important to recognize that within faiths there is often little agreement on how to proceed on an issue. The issue of global climate change, and the debates about divinity that spring from it, demonstrates that this is true of Christian communities.

Equally important, this analysis is not without its own limitations. For one thing, my work has taken the theological declarations of academics and religious leaders within the two faith communities to be representative of the disputes occurring between these two groups. This approach cannot account for the myriad of interactions and attitudes that exist across the majorities of the members of these faith communities. As such, I have done little to describe the “on the ground” relationship between these faith communities, an approach that may have yielded a starkly different sort of analysis. That being said, I do think examining the theologies supported by academics and theologians within these faith communities is important; even though most Christians would not use vocabulary like “dualist” or “immanentist” to describe themselves, such ideas will often form the philosophical underpinnings of their worldview. Additionally, documents like the *Declaration of Christian Care of Creation* demonstrate that these theological articulations are often explicitly adopted by many of the members of faith communities. Nevertheless, an analysis that focuses more on the members of these groups represents an avenue for further inquiry.

A second area ripe for continued research is the question of how, specifically, cooperation between these two groups would manifest itself. In other words, I have suggested that discussions of sin and the value of creation in the process of redemption

could serve as a jumping off point for further cooperation and action, but it is an open question as to what this sort of cooperation would specifically look like. There are multiple issues involved in this question. For one thing, there are questions of structure: How would a coalition between evangelical and progressive Christians be organized? How would membership be determined? Additionally, there are questions of what sorts of actions these groups would cooperatively pursue. Obviously, there are many possibilities: From direct governmental lobbying to grassroots activities that aim to change people's behavior, environmental groups are already pursuing many different strategies in their attempts to curtail GCC. The issue then becomes one of choosing the strategies that would be most effective for a Christian coalition to pursue. These are not easy questions to answer, and they will require many difficult discussions. If the work I have done here can spark some of those discussions, I will consider it a success.

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