

Examining the Environmental Attitudes of Euro-American and African-American Mainline and Fundamentalist Protestant Pastors

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Abstract In recent years there has been increasing attention paid to religion in the United States, particularly to the division between mainline and fundamentalist Protestant Christians. There have been relatively few studies that have dealt with this division in regards to how these individuals view environmental issues. Existing studies have focused on individual parishioners rather than on the beliefs of individual pastors, who I assume for the purposes of this study are in positions of influence and leadership within the churches. Understanding the environmental attitudes of Protestant pastors and therefore the spiritual guidance parishioners receive may lead to an understanding of whether parishioners ultimately turn this guidance into action. This study examined the differences in environmental opinions between four groups of pastors: African-American mainline, African-American fundamentalist, Euro-American mainline, and Euro-American fundamentalist pastors. Individual interviews were conducted with each pastor to determine the level of overall concern for the environment and type of concerns the pastors exhibited. The mainline pastors interviewed exhibited a greater overall concern for the environment than did fundamentalist pastors. Both Euro-American fundamentalist and Euro-American mainline pastors exhibited a greater concern for global environmental problems than local problems. African-American mainline pastors also exhibited a greater concern for environmental problems than African-American fundamentalists, but this difference was minimal. The gap between fundamentalist and mainline was much more apparent in the case of Euro-American pastors. The clear differences between the fundamentalist and mainline pastors appeared to be related to the fundamentalist pastors' strict interpretation of the Bible, while the more uniform responses of the African-American pastors might be a result of the importance of their common cultural heritage and experiences.

Introduction

Until recently, the relationship between religious beliefs and concern for the environment has been studied infrequently. Currently, many issues concerning religion, particularly the Protestant Christian denominations, have gained heightened interest in the United States. Much of this attention is due to a split in philosophy within these denominations, between the fundamentalist forces and the more moderate Protestants. The defining characteristic of fundamentalist Christians is that they believe the Bible to be the infallible, inspired Word of God, and believe that it should be interpreted literally (Mayer 2004, Wacker 2000). Moderate mainline Christians are defined as all non-fundamentalist Protestant Christians. This is a sizeable group, and one that varies in their approach to studying the Bible. The one common characteristic of mainline Christians is that they believe that the Bible is open to some level of interpretation, although the degree of interpretation allowed differs among denominations.

Lynn White's (1967) thesis has dominated this area of study until recently. White proposed that the Judeo-Christian faith is the cause of our current ecological crisis. He believed that these religious beliefs are fundamentally anti-environmental because they emphasize the needs of humanity over nature and treat nature as something to be dominated and subdued. Since then, research has shown that individuals from more fundamental religious groups, mostly fundamentalist Christians, tend to exhibit attitudes corresponding to lower levels of concern for environmental issues (Guth et al. 1995, Hartwig 1999). Since these studies do not distinguish among types of environmental issues, Schultz et al. (2000) examined the attitudes of Christians in regards to ecocentric concerns and anthropocentric concerns. Ecocentric concerns are related to the intrinsic value of plants and animals, while anthropocentric concerns are related to the effect environmental damage will have on the quality of life for humans. Schultz et al. found that a literal belief in the Bible was negatively correlated to ecocentric environmental concerns and positively correlated to anthropocentric concerns. All of the previously mentioned studies deal with churchgoers, but do not take into account the views of the pastors, who are in positions of influence and leadership within the church. This study will examine the environmental attitudes of mainline and fundamentalist pastors, specifically gauging their overall level of concern for the environment and what types of environmental problems they deem to be most significant.

Another interesting dimension of the church and the environmental attitudes of its parishioners can be found when examining the differences between African Americans and

Euro-Americans. This relationship is not one that has been studied widely. The prevailing belief has been that African Americans were not as concerned as Euro-Americans about environmental issues. It has been argued that African Americans are more concerned with “survival” issues such as housing and jobs (Kreger 1973), however, newer studies have indicated that African Americans actually tend to exhibit the same, if not more concern for environmental issues than do Euro-American Americans (Commission for Racial Justice 1987, Mohai 1990, Mohai 2003) These studies have focused on the two populations in general rather than particular religious groups. Little is known about how different racial groups within the protestant church reconcile their faith and environmental views.

The aim of this study is to find out the overall level of concern for the environment among four groups of pastors: African American fundamentalists, African-American mainline, Euro-American fundamentalists, and Euro-American mainline, and to find out what types of environmental problems pastors in each group deem to be most important. This study seeks to discover why these pastors feel the discussed problems are important and whether they have a biblical basis for these beliefs. Based on the previously mentioned Mohai studies, I believe that African-American mainline pastors will exhibit the greatest overall level of concern for the environment, while the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors will exhibit the least overall concern for the environment. Although African-Americans tend to exhibit a good deal of overall concern for the environment, this level of concern varies according to the environmental issue being addressed (Commission for Racial Justice 1987). I predict that African-Americans will exhibit the most concern for local environmental problems, while the Euro-American pastors will exhibit more concern for global environmental problems.

Methods

The study was conducted in Pasadena, CA., and immediately surrounding cities, where there are African-American and mainly Euro-American churches, as well as mainline and fundamentalist churches. I took an opportunity sample of pastors from this area. I conducted a total of 18 interviews, 12 with Euro-American pastors and 6 with African-American pastors. Of the 12 Euro-American pastors, 7 were mainline and 5 were fundamentalist. Of the 6 African-American pastors, 3 were mainline and 3 fundamentalist. Pastors were contacted by either e-mail, phone, or in person and asked to take part in an interview. Once consent was given, a date

suitable to both parties was determined and an interview was conducted at that time. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 45 minutes with 30 minutes as the mode. The interviews were audio taped to allow for analysis at a later time. The format of the interview was semi-structured, with a set of pre-determined questions, while also allowing the interviewer to probe deeper into areas that warranted further discussion. (See Appendix for interview questions).

The introductory question was, “What are the most important environmental problems we face today?” The purpose of this question was to gauge the individual’s immediate response and to determine whether their instinct was to first name a global or local environmental problem. Then, using methodology modified from Mohai’s study on African-American environmental attitudes (2003), the pastors were presented with a list of environmental problems, ranging from global warming to pollution in the streets, and were asked to rate the seriousness of the problems on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not serious, and 5 being very serious. They were asked to rate each problem on both a global scale and a local scale. The global scale refers to how serious the problem is in the world at large, while the local scale refers to how serious the problem is in the city or community in which each pastor lives. This information was used to identify whether the pastors rated local or global problems as more serious, as well as to gauge their overall level of concern for the environment. An individual who consistently rates the problems as 3 or less is clearly exhibiting less concern than an individual who rates the problems at 4 or 5. A second set of questions sought to determine any actions the pastors or their church might take that they view as “environmentally-friendly.” The final question asked the pastors to respond to a biblical quote from Genesis and to state whether this passage has influenced their perception of environmental issues. The passage states, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28 New King James Bible) If they felt this passage had not influenced them, they were asked if there were alternate passages that did influence their views on the subject.

Results

The first question of each interview was “What are the most important environmental problems we face today?” All 6 African-American pastors answered air pollution and water pollution. Global warming was also listed by one of the African-American mainline pastors.

Eighty-three percent of the Euro-American pastors listed air pollution and water pollution, but Euro-American fundamentalist and mainline pastors differed in that 75 percent of the mainline pastors also listed global warming and depletion of the ozone layer. Only 20 percent of the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors listed either global warming or depletion of the ozone layer as a serious problem. Next, when asked to rate the seriousness of different environmental problems on a scale of 1 to 5, the fundamentalist pastors consistently rated the problems lower than the mainline pastors. The average rating given by the fundamentalist pastors was 3.1, while the average rating given by the mainline pastors was 3.8. Another trend that emerged was that nearly all of the African-American and Euro-American pastors rated the each of the problems higher on the global scale than the local scale. Of the four groups of pastors, African-American mainline pastors gave the highest average ratings while Euro-American fundamentalist pastors gave the lowest average ratings.

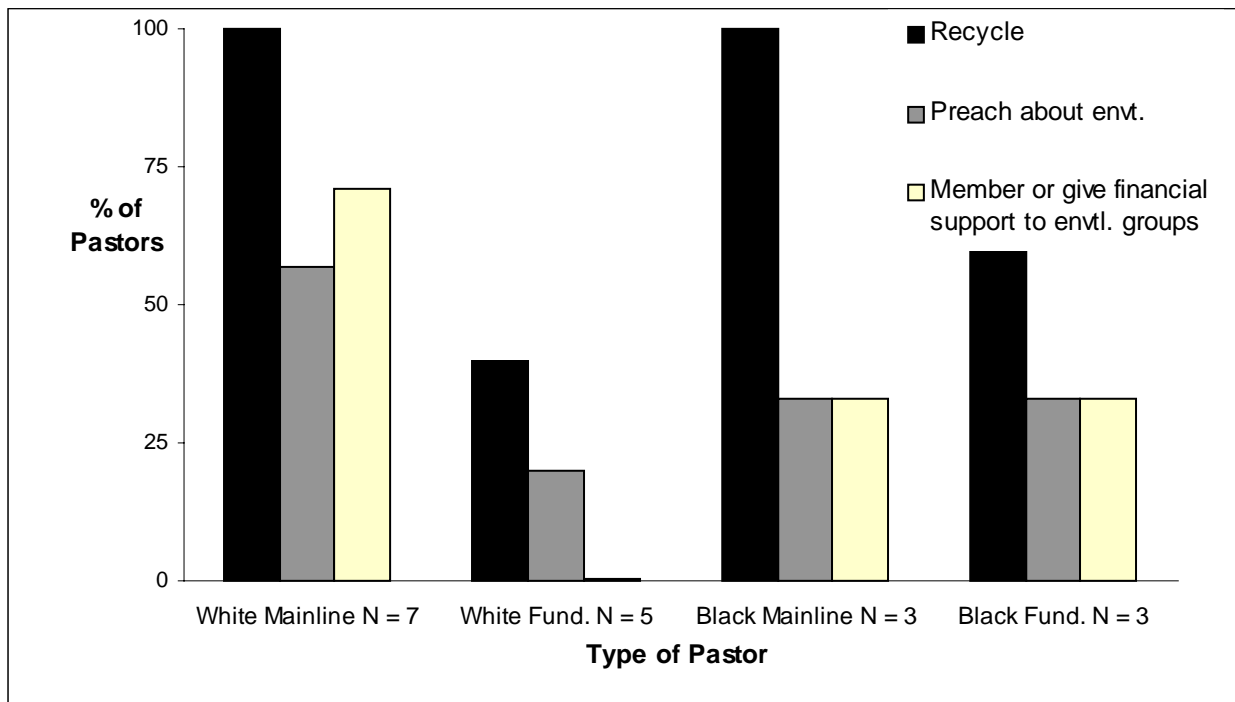


Figure 1. Percentage of each group of pastors who regularly took part in activities that they felt benefited the environment in some way.

Next, the pastors were asked about their personal practices in regards to eco-friendly action. When asked if they personally spent any time participating in activities that benefited the environment in some way, the Euro-American mainline and fundamentalists and the African-

American mainline and fundamentalists clearly differed. As shown in Figure 1, over half of the pastors, with the exception of the Euro-American fundamentalists, said that they recycled on a regular basis. The number of individuals who preached about conservation or other environmental issues was much smaller for all groups. There was a 37 percent gap between the Euro-American mainline and fundamentalist pastors, while there was no difference between African-American mainline and fundamentalist pastors. Finally, the number of individuals who said they were members of, or financially supported environmental organizations varied widely across the groups. While 71 percent of Euro-American mainline pastors were members of, or supported environmental organizations, none of the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors were or did so. Again, there was no difference between the African-American mainline and fundamentalist pastors.

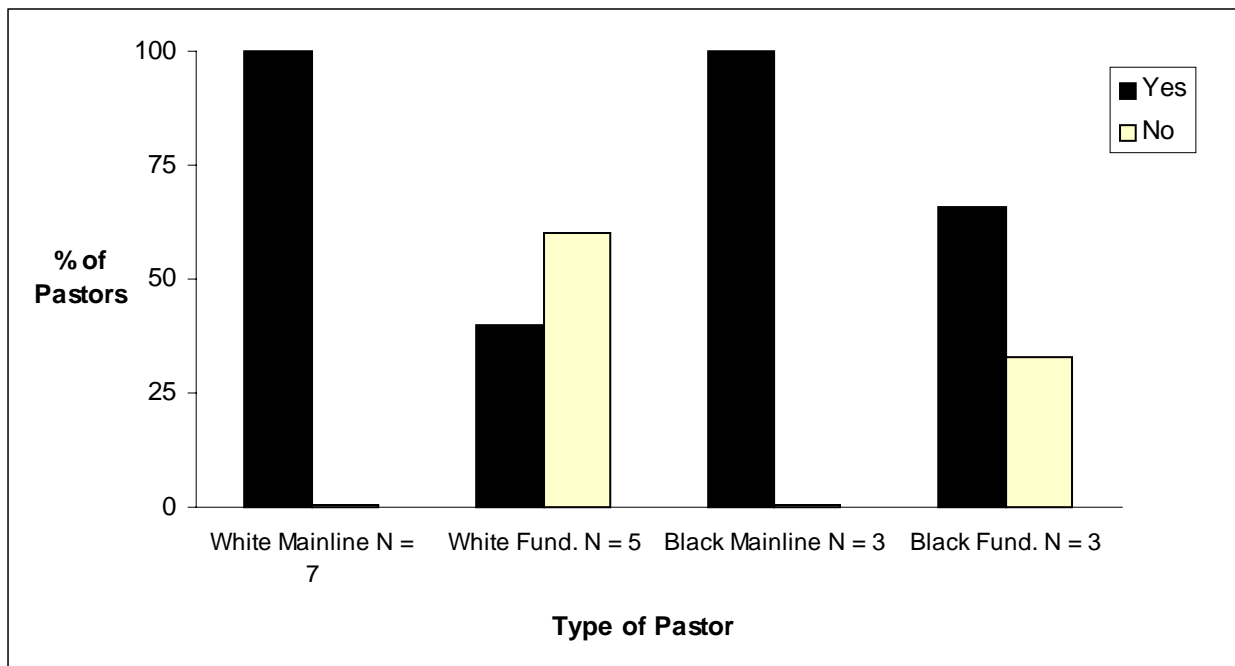


Figure 2. Results of pastors' responses to the question, "Does your church do anything that you think benefits the environment in some way?"

When asked if churches have an obligation to address issues of sustainability and conservation, all of the mainline pastors of both races as well as all of the African-American fundamentalist pastors said yes, while 80 percent of the Euro-American pastors also said yes. Figure 2 shows the results of when the pastors were asked if their churches, rather themselves

individually, did anything that they believed benefited the environment in some way. All of the mainline of pastors of both races said yes, stating that they at least recycled on a regular basis. Of the Euro-American mainline pastors, 71 percent said that their churches worked hard to reduce waste and recycle. 29 percent said that their churches also use low-watt, long lasting light bulbs, do not use paper or plastic plates and utensils, and only serve fair-trade coffee. Thirty three percent of the African-American fundamentalist pastors said their churches did not do anything in particular that they saw as environmentally friendly. Of the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors, 60 percent said their churches did not do anything in particular. The other 40 percent said that their churches recycle and try to reduce their waste.

When asked if Genesis 1:28 had influenced their perception of environmental issues, all of the African-American pastors replied negatively. They all argued that this passage had been misused by some individuals to justify the exploitation of the earth's natural resources. All of the Euro-American mainline pastors stated that this passage has influenced their views on the subject, but that "subdue" and "dominion" are not meant to be taken literally. They argue that this verse instructs us to be stewards of God's creation and that we are meant to nurture and care for it. Of the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors, 40 percent reflected the same views of the mainline pastors. The other 60 percent stated that this verse has influenced their views on the subject, and they argue that this verse should be taken literally. The words "subdue" and "dominion" over the earth refer to the fact that God has placed us in control of his creation and that we are to use it as we see fit, even if that leads to the ultimate degradation of the earth's resources.

Discussion

One of the striking trends that emerged from the data was the difference between the Euro-American fundamentalist and mainline pastors. From their responses, the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors did not seem to place much emphasis on the importance of conservation and preservation of natural resources. One common statement that I heard from the Euro-American fundamentalist pastors was that the caring for the environment is not something that should be made a priority. One pastor argued, "We are in the business of helping people first. Caring for the environment is important, but that comes after we take care of the needs of people." He elaborated to argue that the spiritual and material needs of people far outweigh the

needs of nature. Another Euro-American fundamentalist pastor went further in saying that preservation of the environment is not important at all. He argues “ We cannot fatally harm the environment through our daily actions. The end of the world is dictated by the coming of Christ, and no matter what we do to the Earth, we will not be able to destroy it because Christ will come before that day.” It is interesting to note that when asked if churches have an obligation to address issues of sustainability and conservation, all of the mainline pastors of both races answered yes, and 80 percent of Euro-American fundamentalist pastors answered yes. This data seems contradictory, given the previous question where only 40 percent of fundamentalist pastors said they recycled, 20 percent preached about preservation of the environment, and none were members of or financially supported any environmental organizations. There seems to be a disconnect between what the fundamentalist pastors say is important, and what they actually practice.

The Euro-American mainline pastors were not as uniform in their responses as the fundamentalist pastors, yet they did consistently exhibit more of a concern for environmental issues than did the fundamentalist pastors. A few of the mainline pastors exhibited personal action far beyond the average person, buying only fair-trade coffee and composting their waste. Unlike the fundamentalist pastors, the mainline pastors seem to actually practice behaviors that they say are important. While some of the mainline pastors were not as active as these individuals, they all seemed to agree that humanity had a God-given responsibility, and even a mandate to protect and care for all of creation. This difference between the majority of Euro-American fundamentalist and mainline pastors may be related to their different philosophies on how to treat scripture. Fundamentalists believe the Bible is literally true, so when they hear the words “subdue the earth,” many interpret it to mean just that. Mainline pastors tend to look at the Bible as a whole and place individual verses or passages into a larger context. One mainline pastor explained that when Genesis says that we are to have “dominion over the earth,” when placed into the larger context and intent of the scriptures, it instructs us to be able to control the earth to the point where we are able to cultivate it to serve our needs as well as care for it so that we can pass on its life-sustaining power to future generations.

Unlike the Euro-American mainline and fundamentalist pastors, the African-American mainline and fundamentalist pastors seemed to have views that were not completely divergent. This similarity of views between the two groups of pastors was not expected given their differing

philosophies on interpreting the Bible. This occurrence may best be explained by understanding the role of the church in African-American culture. As one pastor put it, “The Black church is the center of Black culture in America. Everything seems to flow out of the church, and it is the only place where Black people can get together once a week to fellowship together and embrace our culture.” The African-American church is the central point for African-American culture, regardless of denomination. African-Americans also share a history of fighting for civil rights and standing against oppression. In these struggles, the church was the center of the movement, as many of the non-violent methods used were taken directly from the teachings of Christ. Through these experiences, a bond seems to have developed among African-Americans that is not found within the Euro-American culture. That may be why the rift between fundamentalist and mainline is nowhere as distinct in the African-American church as it is in the Euro-American church.

Another trend that emerged has to do with the idea of thinking globally versus locally. Most of the pastors interviewed felt that global problems were more serious than local problems. This may be related to the fact that all of the pastors interviewed were from neighborhoods where there were few local environmental problems. Most of the pastors interviewed are from churches in similar areas of Pasadena, namely zip codes 91101, 91103, and 91104, where the household median incomes are \$38,187, \$34,828, and \$41,815 respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). It would seem that since these individuals are from similar neighborhoods, affluence is not a significant factor that is contributing to the differences in environmental beliefs among the pastors interviewed. Returning to the idea of global versus local, African-American pastors consistently named local pollution as a problem they were concerned about. They were specifically concerned about trash and litter in the streets, as well as graffiti on local buildings. Although many Euro-American pastors interviewed were from churches that were in close proximity to these African-American pastors, very few of them named trash and litter as something they were concerned about. This again, may be explained by cultural differences between the two groups. One African-American pastor noted, “Maintaining a clean yard and street is a sign of self-respect and respect for others. When I see streets and homes that are immaculately kept, I think to myself, ‘what great respect that shows.’”

While there are many differences between the four different groups, there is reason to believe that fundamentalists are not completely hostile towards the ideas of conservation and the

preservation of nature. A common theme among the fundamentalists was that they did not trust environmentalists or groups associated with conservation, such as The Sierra Club and Greenpeace. These pastors felt that these organizations tend to place too much value on nature, while not placing enough value on people. One pastor said, “These people would rather save a beetle than allow us to build a road or something that would benefit lots of people.” The fundamentalist pastors clearly believed that people were more important than nature, and that preserving nature was fine, so long as it was not at the expense of people. This distrust of environmentalists may be related to why fundamentalist pastors rated issues like global warming and depletion of the ozone layer lower than mainline pastors. They are skeptical of what environmentalists tell them, however, a few of these fundamentalist pastors said that if they were to hear the same warnings about global warming from a source that they trusted, like another fundamentalist, they would be much more likely to accept it as a serious problem. It seems that these so-called “environmentalists” need to find allies outside of their normal sphere of support, particularly within the conservative fundamentalist Christians, to get their news across to a new audience. It may also benefit them to frame environmental issues within a context that also addresses people, rather than nature alone.

It is important to note the limited size and non-random nature of the sample that was taken. Because of limiting time, resources, and the nature of the interview, only 18 pastors were interviewed. The following results are indicative of the situation in one city, and may therefore be found in other cities across the country.

While there is no shortage of opinions and beliefs when it comes to issues surrounding Christianity and the environment, certain trends do seem to clearly emerge, though, when examining the data. Mainline pastors in general, seem to show a greater overall concern for the environment than do fundamentalist pastors. The differences in philosophy between the Euro-American fundamentalist and mainline pastors are much deeper than between the African-American pastors. Finally, African-American pastors seemed to exhibit an equal, if not greater overall concern for the environment than Euro-American pastors. The findings of this study may serve to aid those in the environmental advocacy field that are trying to gain allies within the Christian community. It will be helpful for these groups to have an idea of which types of pastors would be most receptive to their cause. Whether or not environmentally conscious pastors ultimately leads to environmentally conscious parishioners is not entirely known, but would be

an interesting area for further study. The knowledge of the environmental attitudes of pastors may prove increasingly important as we enter a time where the mobilization of large groups of people will ultimately be needed to slow the growing environmental problems around the world.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1) What are the most important environmental problems we face today?

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about how to address these problems.

2) Have you personally spent any time to specifically address any of the issues you named or included in the list I just gave you?

YES _____ NO _____

If yes, which ones? What did you do?

3) Are there OTHER things that you do that you think help the environment? If so, what are they?

YES _____ NO _____

4) Should churches take on a role in addressing any of these issues?

YES _____ NO _____

If yes, which ones? What should they do?

5) Does your church do anything that you think benefits the environment? If yes, what do they do?

YES _____ NO _____

6) *Finally, some people think the following passage has affected the way we treat the environment.*

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Genesis 1:29.

Would you say this passage has influenced your perception of environmental issues? If yes, how? If not, why?

YES _____ NO _____

