



RELIGION AND SCIENCE MUST WORK TOGETHER IN FAVOR OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Religião e ciência devem trabalhar juntas em favor do movimento ambientalista

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ABSTRACT:

Environmental issues are on the agenda around the world; however, many conservative governments have developed erratic, inadequate, or even counterproductive policies on these issues. These governments typically have broad support from particular religious groups, reinforced by the dissemination of misinformation about environmental threats, especially through the Internet. It is proposed that, in order to establish sound environmental policy, science must have religion as an ally, so it must be demonstrated that religious texts indicate the need to harmonize with nature, especially in Christian belief groups. Science can make evidence-based information on environmental threats available, and religion can make its force and social energy available to help to mobilize appropriate environmental policy.

Palavras-Chave: Environmental preservation; religion; Bible; Christian; Science.

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, conservative governments are taking erratic, inadequate, and even counterproductive actions on the environmental crises that are now and will in the future be harming the global population. The reasons are multiple and complex, including dissemination of false news regarding environmental issues on the Internet, especially fake news related to climate change, global warming, and deforestation in the Amazon (Silva, 2022) and the ways in which social networks favor the dissemination of related conspiracy theories (Silva, 2021).

But the support of these politically conservative governments by theologically conservative religious groups is also important. In order for there to be meaningful action on the environmental crises, it is necessary to dissolve the connections between these religious groups and the misguided environmental policies they support.

To take an example from Brazil, the government, under President Jair Bolsonaro, has favored the opening of mining in indigenous lands, disregarded data on deforestation, and threatened to abandon international treaties on the environment (Escobar, 2019). At the same time, the government enjoys broad support from religious groups: Bolsonaro's election was aided by massive support from the evangelical segment (Almeida, 2019). No religious leaders of any prominence have publicly opposed these harmful policies.

The alignment of religious conservatives with politicians unfavorable to environmental causes is not a phenomenon restricted to developing countries, poorly consolidated democracies, and poorly educated populations. Consider the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. His government took stands clearly contrary to the main environmental causes (Bomberg, 2017) and maintained a strong political base of support among conservative religious groups (Reinbold, 2019). A good example is its withdrawal from the Paris agreement (Selby, 2019), a global pact designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This withdrawal was welcomed by these religious groups. It is astonishing that groups that are so insistent on describing themselves as pro-life when discussing the issue of abortion were so blasé about a decision that would harm the quality of life for so many of the future inhabitants of the warming world.

There is no way to avoid the global environmental crises that we are experiencing: the signs are clear, and the effects are evident. Yet religious conservatism has been largely successful in its agenda of resisting and reversing the movement to preserve the environ-

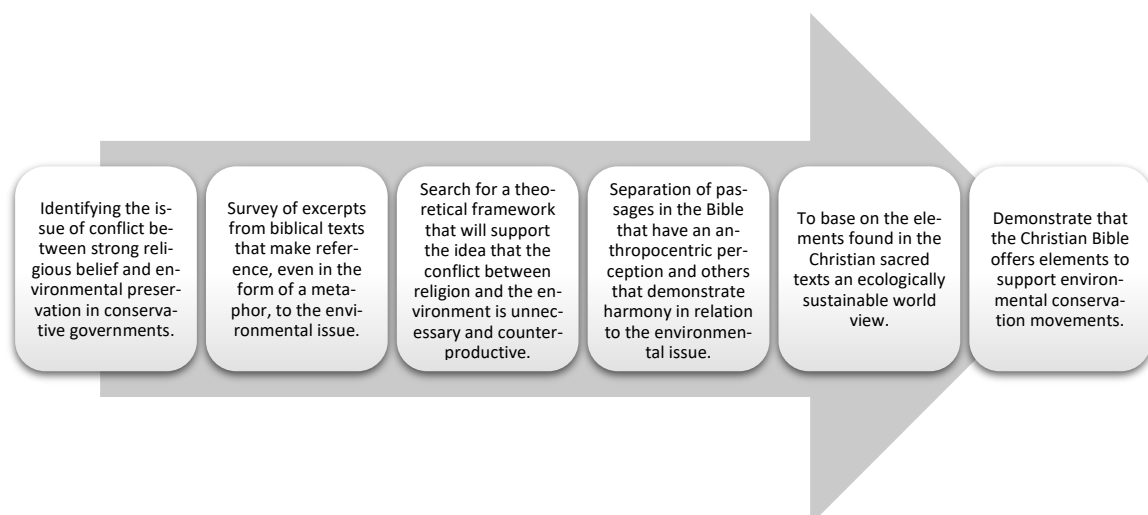
ment. That movement already faced significant challenges. There are certainly ways to reverse the destruction of the environment (Mace *et al.*, 2018), but they are not easy, requiring not only financial resources but also changes of habit, which are difficult but not impossible.

One of the ways to help to surmount these challenges is to recruit social actors who are more than usually committed to their goals, those who fervently follows a religious belief. Therefore, in order to respond to the urgency of global environmental demands, it is necessary to consider the opportunity to align science with religion in pursuit of a higher purpose (Negi, 2005).

The objective of this work is to seek elements in the biblical text, which is central to the Christian religions prevalent in the Western hemisphere, which attenuate the dichotomy between environment and belief, a recurring theme among some conservative governments. Christianity is the focus on account of its pervasiveness in the West; it should of course be kept in mind that there and elsewhere there are religious traditions that afford less purchase for attitudes and practices inimical to protecting the environment.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was carried out in the text of the Christian Bible, looking for excerpts that harmonize with support for protecting the environment. Excerpts were identified that could suggest exactly the opposite, that nature is important only in the light of human purposes, reflecting an anthropocentric view of the world. Nevertheless, there are passages that suggest that it is possible to show even conservatives that the biblical text upports the environmental movement.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It must be acknowledged that ideas change throughout history, and ideas in religion are no different. Significant change is not easy in the religious field, but it is not impossible: consider the support for slavery for centuries that was offered by various religions but today is virtually banned in the circles of major religious beliefs (Chapron; Epstein; López-Bao, 2019). In principle someone can rely on the Christian Bible to support a view of nature as anthropocentric and policies that ignore the need for environmental preservation. After all, in many passages of Genesis the reader, or believer, is commanded to reproduce, populate, and subdue the earth. All creatures were given to man (Genesis 1: 26-30) and the animals should fear us (Genesis 9: 2-3). The creator further reveals that he gives his creations to anyone he pleases (Jeremiah 27: 5).

But just religious perspectives on the issue of slavery changed, thanks in part to revised understandings of the Bible, so might religious perspectives on the issue of the environment might change. There are certainly Biblical passages that can be cited in favor of the environmental cause. If everything is of God, the earth and everything in it (Psalm 24: 1), so any action against the environment – opposition to the Paris treaty or support for the expansion of agriculture into Amazon rainforest – would be against God. God also created and owns the seas (Psalm 95: 5): the acidification of the oceans (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2018) is an affront to him. Romans (8: 19-22) points out that nature groans as if in the pains of childbirth because of our actions. What could be more painful to nature than the current environmental crisis (Di Marco *et al.*, 2018)?

The biblical text instructs us to ask the animals, the birds, the fish, and they will teach us (Job 12: 7-10), as if it were yet another ecological pamphlet from some highly engaged NGO calling for involvement with the environmental cause. When the Bible calls for the Earth and everything in it –in the seas, in the fields, in the forests – to rejoice (Psalm 96: 11-12), isn't it implicit that we should give it cause to rejoice? When Psalm 104: 10-24 emphasizes that God was so careful in creating nature and its creatures, is not the message that humans should take care not to spoil them? And finally Matthew (6: 26-30) even preaches in effect against unbridled consumerism while recommending attention to how plants grow. Is it not appealing to understand this as a recommendation to worry less about our material possessions and more about the state of the?

The previous paragraph looks more like a religious pamphlet, full of quoted biblical references, and perhaps more appropriate for a Christian sermon. Honestly, I hope some – or many – religious leaders will use it so! But I do not think that it is inappropriate for the present venue. We need to reflect on is whether in scientific publications we are building bridges or barriers between religion and science. Pope Francis himself condemns what he calls “tyrannical anthropocentrism,” in which humans feel free to use and destroy the environment at will, and calls for a new legal framework to be built to protect ecosystems (Chapron; Epstein; López-Bao, 2019). Isn’t this what scientists want? Isn’t that the kind of vision we want to prosper and reverberate?

Religion, and the energy of its followers, can be a starting point for a global shift towards environmental issues. Allied with science, religion can break with any conspiracy theories and political movements or any other bias that threatens nature. For this to happen, religious groups must be persuaded and motivated to realize that we are facing unprecedented environmental emergencies, including but not limited to those resulting from global warming (Dunlap; Jacques, 2013; Almiron; Xifra, 2019; Farrel, 2018).

Religious conservatism, or at least part of it, nowadays often stands against nongovernmental organizations for environmental preservation and scientists who report on environmental issues. This opposition is not necessary, especially in countries where secularism is not consolidated. Scientists, and science communication, can have a profound effect on these peoples regarding environmental awareness if they can demonstrate that there is no fundamental antagonism and indeed there are confluences regarding environmental issues. And because religion has pervasive ramifications beyond politics, reaching formal and informal education and civil society in general, the recruitment of religious conservatism in the service of environmental protection promises to have a profound effect for the better.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We must communicate better, without aggression, insisting on the value of science, but also emphasizing that religion and science are not enemies and stressing that religion is not an enemy of and can even be a driving force for environmental preservation. We are all in this together: the consequences of our actions in relation to environmental crises will affect atheists and believers, non-scientists, and scientists, so the confluence of interest ought to

be clear. Science has the information about environmental crises and religion has the energy to motivate action on them. The task is now to forge the connection in a forceful and irreversible way.

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RESUMO:

As questões ambientais estão na agenda dos grandes confrontos globais em todo o mundo; entretanto, muitos governos conservadores desenvolveram políticas erráticas, inadequadas ou até mesmo contraproducentes sobre essas questões. Esses governos normalmente contam com amplo apoio de grupos religiosos específicos, reforçado pela disseminação de informações científicas errôneas sobre ameaças ambientais, especialmente através da Internet. Propõe-se que, a fim de estabelecer uma política ambiental sólida, a ciência deve ter a religião como aliada, portanto deve ser demonstrado que os textos religiosos podem indicar a necessidade de harmonização com a natureza, especialmente em grupos de crenças cristãs. A ciência pode disponibilizar informações baseadas em evidências sobre ameaças ambientais, e a religião pode disponibilizar sua força e energia social para ajudar a mobilizar uma política ambiental apropriada.

Palavras-chave: Preservação ambiental; Religião; Bíblia; Cristão; Ciência.

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