

## A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future

**Roger S. Gottlieb**

Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2006 (288 pages)

## Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics

**John Hart**

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006 (274 pages)

Early in C. S. Lewis's fantasy *Perelandra*, the antagonist, Weston, a great physicist, tells the protagonist, Ransom, a philologist, that he has been persuaded that "life was inherent in matter from the very beginning." Thrilled by "this blind, inarticulate purposiveness thrusting its way upward," he determines, "Man in himself is nothing. The forward movement of Life—the growing spirituality—is everything. . . . To spread spirituality . . . is henceforth my mission. . . . I worked first for myself; then for science; then for humanity; but now at last for Spirit itself—I might say, borrowing language which will be more familiar to you, the Holy Spirit." "Nothing now divides you and me," Weston concludes, "except a few outworn theological technicalities with which organized religion has unhappily allowed itself to get incrustated."

"I don't know much about what people call the religious view of life," Ransom replies. "You see, I'm a Christian. And what we mean by the Holy Ghost is *not* a blind, inarticulate purposiveness."

That passage came to mind almost constantly while reading John Hart's *Sacramental Commons* and frequently also in the course of Roger S. Gottlieb's *A Greener Faith*. It is poetically fitting that Ransom, the Christian layman and lover of words, insisted on clearly defining *spirit*—particularly the *Holy Spirit*—and distinguishing between that divine Spirit and evil spirits. Alas, the book was written over sixty years ago. Today even many philologists and Christian theologians repudiate such distinctions as easily as Weston did. Certainly neither Gottlieb, a Jewish philosopher, nor Hart, a Catholic priest, takes them seriously. Postmodernism has infiltrated even the church.

As a Christian theologian and apologist first and an economic and environmental ethicist second, my chief concern in reading these two books was their underlying theology, which in neither book is orthodox, whether Jewish or Christian. Instead, both authors are theologically pluralist, relativist, inclusivist—one might say New Age. Religious perspectives seem for them to be interesting, even useful when they promote environmentalist notions they embrace, but questions of their truth or falsehood are irrelevant. For Gottlieb, the liberal Jew, this occasions no surprise, but for Hart it ought to raise significant questions about clerical integrity.

Hart goes to great pains, for instance, to distinguish pantheism from panentheism and endorse the latter, but his distinction collapses when he writes, "All that exists—biotic and antibiotic being, and cosmic energies—ultimately has natural rights as part of *integral*

being, the continuing, changing, and complexifying original existent" (138), and defines integral being as "the totality of being which has been both the origin of all being and beings, and the stuff from which all being has been made and is being comprised ..." (222). Echoes of Teilhard de Chardin and A. N. Whitehead dominate Hart's process theology. Good-bye *creatio ex nihilo* and the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

Gottlieb may be applauded for recognizing theological distinctions Hart blurs or ignores. He is a sophisticated philosopher. Yet for him, too, truth seems of little concern. Like so many environmentalist books (including *Sacramental Commons*), *A Greener Faith* abounds in unsubstantiated instances of the "environmental crisis." Gottlieb claims that human beings have "extinguished 150 species each day" (that's 54,750 per year!) (4), with nary an attempt to document the assertion even with biodiversity *models*, let alone with empirical field studies—the most thorough of which, sponsored by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and reported in *Tropical Deforestation and Species Extinction* (1992), found no confirmation of such claims despite having set out to find just that.

Like so many environmentalists, Gottlieb suffers from myopia. One narrow fixation is on the parts while neglecting the whole: "our breasts, our prostates, our lungs, and our bloodstream are no longer what they were" because of chemical contamination (4)—despite the fact that we are living longer and healthier lives. Another is on the short term while neglecting the long: "Few things will become cleaner, fresher, more pure; most will become a little bit more polluted or diminished" (5)—despite the clear demonstrations of an "environmental transition" (i.e., the tendency for pollutant concentrations to rise during early economic development but then to fall below predevelopment levels as people grow rich enough to afford the costly good that is a clean, healthful environment. See, for example, Indur Goklany, *The Improving State of the World: Why We're Living Longer, Healthier, More Comfortable Lives on a Cleaner Planet.*)

Both books also promote Marxist economics. They call for redistributivist, egalitarian policies. They see the market, and especially multinational corporations, as the enemy of the environment and freedom and especially the poor. They promote the discredited dependency theory to explain Third World poverty. They embrace the Ehrlichian notion that negative environmental impact correlates positively with rising population, affluence, and technology, despite the evidence of the environmental transition noted above.

As a broad review of ecotheology, Gottlieb's book is certainly the better, and all who want to grasp the subject should read it, despite its many faults. The introduction, "Religion and the Human Meaning of the Environmental Crisis," paints a picture of a humanity besieged by a litany of (always worsening) environmental risks, among which are: chemical pollution causing rising cancer rates (yet most age-indexed cancer rates are stable, and it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which those that seem to be rising seem so only because diagnosis occurs earlier with improving technology); industrial civilization creating "a grave threat unlike anything humanity has ever done before," eliminating rain forests and extinguishing "150 species each day" (yet rain forest destruction diminishes with rising agricultural yields and rapid species extinction claims have never been vali-

dated empirically); and car air conditioners depleting the ozone layer and making “us more susceptible to skin cancer and blindness” (yet no statistically significant correlation exists between CFC emissions and stratospheric ozone depletion, and the annual ozone thinning increases skin cancer risk in the Antarctic region about as much as a move sixty miles nearer to the equator).

One wonders if Gottlieb, any more than the vast majority of movement environmentalists, ever thought to “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Most of the empirical claims he makes about the environment are unsupported or even refuted by empirical data, as demonstrated in *The State of Humanity* (Julian Simon, editor, 1995); *The True State of the Planet* (Ronald Bailey, editor, 1995) and *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Bjørn Lomborg, 1998, 2001). It is apparently easier to repeat mantras than to test them by checking the data—even the mantra, “Shame and guilt for the present give rise to deep fears about the future” as we live in “a perennial state of environmental anxiety” (5). Repeated public opinion polls put concern about the environment far down the list of Americans’ (Gottlieb’s primary audience) priorities.

The picture of environmental crisis and anxiety magnifies and intensifies through the ensuing eight chapters, into which Gottlieb pours additional concerns of the Left, for example, pursuit of women’s equality, protest against the war in Iraq, and acceptance of homosexuality, all of which get mentioned on a single line (7).

Gottlieb attempts to balance his self-described Leftism (104) by looking at a variety of perspectives on the environment. He gives a little over a page to interaction with the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship (with which this author is associated), which he mistakenly says was endorsed by about fifty Jews, Protestants, and Catholics (the actual number was about 1,500). He misrepresents it as saying that “[w]hatever mistakes have occurred or problems arisen ... do not require serious questioning of modernity, free market economics, or technology” (105).

Despite these weaknesses, *A Greener Faith* has considerable value for the discerning reader. It is a substantive book with little wasted text. Perhaps the most interesting chapter, because it is the most personal, is chapter 7, “Five Faces of Religious Environmentalism,” in which Gottlieb presents short vignettes of segments of the religious environmental movement: Evangelical environmentalism, personified in Cal DeWitt and characterized by the attempt to apply Scripture explicitly to environmental stewardship; Jewish or *Tikkun* environmentalism, personified in Arthur Waskow and characterized by the pursuit of justice (defined in egalitarian rather than classical terms) in environmental concerns; Universalist environmentalism, personified in minister Fred Small and characterized by direct action demonstrations and civil disobedience focused mostly on energy issues; Mainline Protestant environmentalism, personified in Tena Willemsma, executive director of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia and cochair of the National Council of Churches Working Group on Eco-justice and characterized by promoting the needs of the poor and the pursuit of “sustainable communities”; and Native American environmentalism, personified in Charon Asetoyer and characterized by emphasis on the sacredness of nature and “The Principles of Environmental Justice” (136–37).

Hart's *Sacramental Commons*, in contrast, is frustratingly vague, which fits its thoroughly New Age, postmodernist approach. Hart anachronistically reads environmental ethics back into the writings of earlier Christians whose *milieu* simply did not allow them to think of environmental issues as do citizens of the post-Industrial Revolution world. He lumps Christian thinkers such as Saint Francis of Assisi with Native American and other religious and spiritual environmentalists, making little or no attempt to distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian. Like Gottlieb, a self-described Leftist, Hart more directly calls for making all things common, explicitly opposing private property (149). He misuses the Old Testament sabbatical and jubilee year laws (chap. 10), claiming that they required a periodic redistribution of wealth through remission of debts and redistribution of land. Actually, the sabbatical year law required temporary suspension of debt collection during the sabbatical year, not permanent remission of debts, and the jubilee year law required the return of land (or freeing of a bond slave) used as collateral for a loan because the interim crops (or labor) had paid off the loan. (See this author's *Prosperity and Poverty* [1988], chap. 4.)

Hart's prose is turgid and laborious. A merciful copy editor would have slashed many sentences to a fourth of their length and weeded out reams of labored jargon such as this:

The creatiocentric consciousness and mode of existence is, in the broadest sense of relationships (animate-to-inanimate; life-to-life; life-to-Spirit; creation-to-Creator), an ecocentric (interrelational) perspective. People are in some nondualistic, integrated way incarnated spirits, unions of the immortal and the mortal, the spiritual and the corporal, the immaterial and the material, the temporal and the eternal. (18)

and this:

Realizations of the commons good, common good, and equitable distribution of common goods are absolute utopias that can be reached over time by the realization of relative utopias. (p. 157)

Alas, even a good copy editor cannot, within the bounds of his responsibility, eliminate utopian nonsense.

Gottlieb and Hart undoubtedly write from good intentions: They want to promote environmental improvement and human harmony and well being. What Adam Smith wrote about merchants ("I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it") sadly applies equally well to many environmentalists, though the affectation is more common among them. In their well-intended pursuit of environmental protection or improvement, they often embrace policies whose effects would be the opposite—such as promoting biofuels, the impact of which would be not only to drive up food prices, thus hurting the poor, but also to bring millions more acres under cultivation, thus diminishing habitat and threatening

biodiversity. Ironically, critics of environmentalism often promote policies that will better protect the environment. In this way, Peter Huber's *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists—A Conservative Manifesto* would be a more helpful read than either Gottlieb or Hart.

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