

Introduction

The impact of human economic activity on the natural environment and what, if anything, governments should do about it have become matters of frequently bitter controversy among advocacy groups. Many Christians have joined in the controversy with enthusiasm. But they have not spoken with one voice; rather, their contributions have covered nearly the full range of ideological positions and (sometimes regrettably) debating styles.

Alternative Views on the Environment

In the United States, the diversity of opinion among Christians was clearly demonstrated by a Pew Research Center survey published in 2009.¹ The survey focused on “global warming,” currently perhaps the most controversial environmental issue (though by no means the

1. Pew Research, Religion & Public Life Project, “Religious Groups’ Views on Global Warming,” April 16 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/16/religious-groups-views-on-global-warming/>. The sample covered 1,502 American adults.

only important one). It sought opinion on two questions. First, was there “solid evidence” that the earth had been getting warmer in recent decades? Those replying yes were asked a further question: had such warming been mostly caused by “human activity” rather than “natural patterns in the environment”? For the sample as a whole, almost half—47 percent—agreed that there had indeed been sustained global warming and that human activity was the cause. Another 18 percent thought the earth was getting warmer but natural, nonhuman environmental factors were causing the change. And only 21 percent of the total thought the earth had not been getting warmer.

These figures were almost identical to those for the subsample of white mainline Protestants. But other groups split very differently. Among those with no Christian affiliation, as many as 58 percent thought that human activity was causing global warming. By contrast, only 34 percent of white evangelical Protestants believed this, while as many as 31 percent of them denied that the earth was warming at all.

Differences in opinion among Christians about the human impact on the environment are compounded by differences over what is to be done about it. Clearly, those who do not think there is an environmental crisis do not consider that any significant action needs to be taken. But among those who agree that the word *crisis* is not too strong, there are still differences about appropriate policies.

The purpose of this book is threefold. It will examine the evidential basis for the different positions taken by Christians on the problems of the environment, not simply on the global warming question but on a range of other important issues. I hope this exercise will be helpful to those whose minds are not already made up. There will also be an examination of the policy alternatives offered by those of different theological persuasions. Here we will be considering in

particular the *economic* implications of recommendations based on theological arguments. In part, the object of this examination will be to clarify the relative costs or advantages of implementing the policies arising from the different approaches. At the same time, the exercise will allow us to pursue a third objective: to see how far the value judgments underlying the developing discipline of *ecological economics* are in harmony or conflict with those of some theologians. Christians do not only differ about the environment; they also differ about economics. Some of those who are most convinced about the need to protect the environment from the depredations of modern industry are also most hostile to the use of economic analysis to help us do this.

Chapter 2, then, examines the main alternative positions taken up by Christian writers and activists who have considered the question of the human impact on the environment. At the opposite extreme from conservative evangelicals are more radical theologians, including some who blame Christianity itself for environmental damage. Some ecofeminist theologians attribute this damage to the patriarchal attitudes they claim underpin all three Abrahamic faiths. Other theologians focus on the instrumentalist view of nature characteristic of Western Christianity, in particular, and passed on to the more secular industrial civilization that emerged first in the West. Both these groups are highly critical of economists, whom they see as apologists for the system of market capitalism within which industrialization developed.

Alternative Views on the Economy

When theologians criticize the economics profession for its attitude toward environmental issues, they have not always fully appreciated the range of attitudes on the environment to be found among

economists themselves. Chapter 3 tries to describe the basic model of the relationship between economy and environment, in as nontechnical a manner as possible, and to clarify the ethical questions underlying the analysis.

Neoliberal or Neoclassical Economics?

In their reluctance to countenance economic intervention by government, conservative commentators espouse, consciously or otherwise, a neoliberal model of the economy, which argues for a minimalist role for the state. Those who attack this model sometimes confuse it with the neoclassical economic model, perhaps lumping them both together in the portmanteau category “market economics” (or, as some prefer, “discredited market economics”). True, neoclassicists use the same analytical methods as neoliberals to study the operations of free markets, but they give more emphasis to the various causes of market failure. The branch of the subject known as “neoclassical welfare economics” contains a well-elaborated theory of how governments should intervene to correct market failure in the interests of economic efficiency. Among the failures the theory considers, and to which it offers policy solutions, are those that involve environmental pollution. Neoliberals, of course, are aware of these arguments but counter them by claiming either that the problems have been greatly exaggerated or that the failures of the market have to be compared with the failures of governments, whose actions, they believe, may very well make matters worse rather than better.

The neoclassical model serves as a very convenient starting point from which to develop a framework for environmental policy analysis. It is therefore presented briefly at the beginning of chapter 3, in which we turn to economists’ views of the problem of

environmental pollution in a market economy. To summarize the argument even more briefly here, for the neoclassical economist the key environmental problem is not the malign influence of patriarchal religion, nor the rapid growth of global industrialization through the application of science and technology to business, nor the expansion of the rule of the market. On the contrary, the problem is the limitations of the market's domain—more precisely, the absence of well-defined property rights in certain important environmental resources. Because of this, businesses can treat these scarce resources as if they were free. By so doing, they unload costs on the rest of society that the individual business itself does not have to pay; these are known as “external costs” in the jargon of economists.

Environmental or Ecological Economics?

Although the techniques of neoclassical environmental economics can take us a long way from the more complacent neoliberal approach, some economists feel that it does not always go far enough. To these economists, the interaction between the economy and the environment (or better, perhaps, “ecosystem”) should be central to economists' concerns, rather than an optional extra as it is often presented in standard textbooks or university courses. They also want to see more integration of politics and ethics in the economic analysis of environmental (and other) issues. In chapter 3 we also consider how far the concerns of these ecological economists overlap with those of the theologians and ethicists whose arguments are reviewed in chapter 2.

As we shall see, economists have been trained in a tradition which emphasizes that individual preferences are to count in social decision making. They also tend to use the language of utilitarianism in defining social objectives. Theologians, even those from a Protestant

tradition, worry about the emphasis on individualism rather than community, and they are often suspicious of utilitarianism. For their part, ecological economists do not neglect the importance of individual preferences but do stress the interaction between individual preferences and community norms in decision making, and they try to take altruistic behavior into account. As far as utilitarianism is concerned, ecological economics does not dispense with the concept of utility maximization. But this is not seen as the sole goal of policy, and it is hedged about with ethical constraints—not least on the distribution of utility as well as its total sum.² Economists of this school also stress the importance not merely of the outcomes of policy but also of the processes through which the outcomes are reached.³

An important difference between at least some theologians and some ecological economists concerns the linked issues of economic growth and globalization. They are linked because trade and the international transfer of technology through foreign investment have been seen by many economists as major engines of growth. To orthodox mainstream economists, economic growth is seen as desirable because it rescues people from poverty; globalization is on balance a positive factor because it allows the benefits of growth to be diffused around the world. By contrast, as was noted earlier, the global spread of market capitalism has been identified by some theologians and other antiglobalization activists as a major force in causing our environmental woes. The benefits of growth, if any, are considered to be outweighed not only by the laying waste of forests, damage to wetlands, and pollution of the oceans but also

2. Michael Common and Sigrid Stagl, *Ecological Economics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11.

3. For a summary of the differences between neoclassical welfare economics and ecological economics, see John Gowdy and Jon D. Erickson, "The Approach of Ecological Economics," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 29, no. 2 (2005): 207–22.

by the destruction of traditional ways of life, the creation of huge unsanitary slums around urban centers, and the transformation of subsistence farmers living (supposedly) in harmony with nature into sweated labor engaged in alienating and exploitative work in unsafe and unhealthy factories. Similarly, trade and foreign investment may be seen principally as ways of extracting natural resources from poor countries for the benefit of shareholders in rich countries and their corrupt accomplices in the governments of the poor ones.

Ecological economists, like other economists, have a range of views but are perhaps most likely to be found in an intermediate position between those who take a positive view of economic growth and globalization and those of more pessimistic inclination. As economists, they are aware of the beneficial impact of economic growth in increasing life expectancy, reducing malnutrition, and expanding educational and other opportunities. But their ecological concerns lead them to doubt that current rates of global resource consumption are in fact sustainable. So while they want to see growth for those countries still in serious poverty, they are eager to call a halt to further growth for those already industrialized.⁴ And they are skeptical of the usefulness of traditional measures of economic growth, such as changes in gross domestic product.

On the question of globalization, ecological economists would certainly be concerned about the effects of trade intensification and hence international transportation on the environment, as well as about the destruction, through overexploitation, of the world's natural resources and fragile environments. Yet they would acknowledge that trade and technology transfer can help lift nations out of poverty as long as the gains from trade are fairly distributed, and they would urge the adoption, by the institutions that manage

4. Common and Stagl, *Ecological Economics*, 194.

international economic relations, of rules for sustainable trade and clean technology transfer.⁵

What about the hostility expressed by some theologians toward what they consider the *commodification* of the environment—the buying and selling of environmental assets? Ecological economists, too, are concerned with setting appropriate boundaries for the territory over which the market is to hold sway. But this does not mean they would necessarily agree with theologians about where to erect the fences. True, for reasons that will be explained in later chapters, it is not always feasible to create marketable property rights in environmental goods. However, where it is feasible, it could be a potentially useful instrument for reducing harmful emissions, and it would be a pity if policymakers were denied the use of it. The suggestion that the sale of permits to pollute is equivalent to the medieval practice of selling indulgences obscures more than it clarifies, and is arguably a category error.⁶

All these issues are addressed in chapter 3. But to grasp fully the practical significance of the ideological distinctions being made, the different approaches must be applied to actual environmental problems. This is the task of chapters 4 through 6 of this book. Finally, chapter 7 explores some implications for Christian environmental activism.

5. *Ibid.*, 468–71.

6. This issue will be considered at length in chapter 6.