

AlbertMohler.com

When Ecology Replaces Theology

Wednesday, October 3, 2007



Is saving the earth what remains when liberal churches are no longer concerned for the salvation of souls? Have these churches replaced theology with ecology? [Frank Furedi](#) is a British sociologist who teaches at the University of Kent. He is also a controversialist and a public intellectual. In a [recent article](#) published at [Spike](#), Furedi suggests that some religious institutions are “busy reinventing themselves by promoting ecological virtues and preaching against the eco-sins of polluters.” He offers a most interesting argument.

Furedi contends that a crisis of authority has shaken many churches, and that modern societies the have largely given up on saving traditional morality. In his words: *Sometime back in the 1980s, Western societies gave up on the project of rescuing ‘traditional values’ and morality. From time to time, conservative politicians and moral entrepreneurs have attempted to launch back-to-basics crusades promoting ‘family values’. However, their lack of popular appeal has only exposed society’s estrangement from these traditions. Indeed by the Eighties, even religious institutions found it difficult to uphold their own authority with conviction. Instead of influencing society many churches began to internalise the attitudes associated with the lifestyles of their increasingly individualised consumerist flock. The last quarter century has seen a steady diminishing of religious authority in Western societies. Debates about the role of women priests, homosexuality and marriage indicated that religious institutions have become confused about their own relationship to traditional values.*

Furedi suggests that these churches are now seeking to find a new platform in order to assert a new claim to authority within the culture. This new platform appears to be ecology and the goal of saving the earth.

His argument is compelling:

In recent years, some in the church have sought to gain the public’s ear through the greening of traditional doctrines, and Christ the Saviour is fast becoming Christ the environmental activist. Western society is continually in search of rituals and symbols through which moral probity can be affirmed. It appears that, for many church leaders, the project of saving the planet offers more opportunities for reconstituting rituals and symbols than the saving of souls.

It is not just the odd priest offering absolution through the ritual of eco-confession. Church leaders have embraced the rituals of eco-morality to demonstrate their commitment to a higher good. Absolution through carbon offsets appears to be the way forward.

An observer of church life today, especially within the shrinking domain of liberal Protestantism, will find plenty of evidence for Furedi’s hypothesis. Ecological concerns appear to serve as a replacement for abandoned doctrines and outdated concerns — such as evangelism.

Furedi finds plenty of support for his argument within contemporary Roman Catholicism, but here is his analysis of the situation within the Church of England:

In 2006, the Church of England launched an eco-crusade entitled ‘Shrinking the Footprint’. The Archbishop of Canterbury complained that ‘early modern religion contributed to the idea that the fate of nature is for it to be bossed around by a detached sovereign will, whether divine or human’. It seems possible that those misguided early modern religionists received that idea from the Book of Genesis, where God gives Man dominion ‘over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth’. Now the head of the Anglican church protests about nature being ‘bossed around’ not only by Man, but by God. This year, the Church of England launched a booklet of green tips for the faithful entitled How Many Christians Does it Take to Change a Lightbulb? Its eco-commandments include: share cars on the road to church, use virtuous low-energy lightbulbs but cast out junk mail, and do not flush the loo at night.

So is Christ the Savior is fast becoming Christ the environmental activist? Furedi’s argument is both insightful and troubling. There can be no doubt that his argument is true with respect to many churches and denominations. And there is

a clear warning here. When churches abandon or marginalize the central doctrines of the Christian faith, another religion soon takes its place. That religion might be a religion of therapy, social action, or ecology — or any number of other substitutes for the Gospel.

As Furedi explains, this particular temptation can be traced to “the powerful influence that environmentalism exercises over contemporary culture.” When churches lose confidence that they can speak to other issues in terms of right and wrong (sex, personal behavior, etc), environmentalism remains. In effect, it is the only socially acceptable form of moralism.

Nevertheless, Furedi believes that this is a losing strategy for the church in terms of social and cultural influence. As he explains, “eco-spirituality cannot really compensate for the loss of traditional moral authority.”

Furthermore, once a church embraces environmentalism as its central mission, its authority suffers and even greater loss because the society considers the true authorities for ecology to be scientists, not church leaders. “The shift away from God towards nature inevitably leads to a world where the pronouncements of environmentalist experts trump those of the priesthood,” he explains. “It will be interesting to see what will remain of traditional religion as prophecy and revelation is displaced by computerised climate models.”

Christians do bear a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth. This is not an easy responsibility to bear in the confusing context of modern ecological debates. But the church of Jesus Christ bears the responsibility to be the steward of the Gospel above all other concerns. The temptation to turn to this-worldly concerns at the expense of spiritual concerns is very strong. Beyond this, human beings will worship either the Creator or the creation. When the authority of the Bible is undermined and confidence that we can know the Creator is compromised, the creation itself looms larger and larger as a central passion.

When a passion for seeing sinners converted to faith in Christ declines, a passion for converting people into environmentalists can appear as a replacement purpose and a culturally-attractive mission.

We should take note when a sociologist like Frank Furedi sees the picture so clearly. Why does he see what so many others miss? When a church forfeits its God-given mission, no other mission matters.

