

La responsabilidad de cuidar bien: Towards a Protestant Environmental Paradigm in Latin America

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Project Background

During a semester in Honduras my sophomore year of college, I became interested in the prevalence of environmental messages despite the absence of a robust national environmental discourse or practice that I witnessed there. As I looked further into this seeming misalignment, I realized that there is no translation into Spanish of the word “stewardship” that maintains the connotations of using well resources that belong to another. This concept is central in North American Protestant (and my own) ethics of the environment. In its absence, I wanted investigate the relationship in Latin America between religion and the natural world, with a particular focus on Protestant Christianity.

Christianity and Environmentalism in Latin America

As in other parts of the world, Christianity in Latin America was slow to renounce a paradigm of complete human dominion over the natural world. This was compounded by a wariness and hostility of Christian imperial powers in Latin America towards indigenous religions, which held the natural world in greater esteem.

The emergence of liberation theology, a dynamic response to the role and teachings of the Catholic Church, was accompanied by a new understanding of the responsibility of Christians towards the natural world. This ethic centers on arguments of environmental injustice, and the outsize impacts of environmental degradation on the poor and vulnerable. This view advocates for a Christian response that prioritizes the needs of these most vulnerable persons and the corresponding address of environmental issues.

Of Protestants in Latin America, the vast majority are Evangelicals. The Evangelicals churches have viewed matters of the environment as external to their mission and worldview, holding a direct and keen focus on the importance of sharing the gospel for the salvation of individuals. While some Protestant churches have gravitated towards environmental ideas arising from liberation theology, this has been inconsistent, in part because of the incongruence of its theological background with Protestant and Evangelical doctrine.

Towards a Protestant Environmental Paradigm

The development of a Latin American Protestant environmental ethic is two-fold: It is a matter of scriptural faithfulness to care well for the world which God created, and, in proportion to the size and influence of the Protestant Church in Latin America, a matter of ecological integrity.

The model of “stewardship” offers a potential pathway forward, providing scripturally-based impotence for human care for the non-human creation. However, this dialogue between Latin American and North American Protestantism must be two-way, and the Latin American focus on the relationship between human suffering and environmental issues ought to inform North American conceptions. In this way, Christians can acknowledge and enact the responsibility to care well.

The full document and sources (in Spanish) can be found at shorturl.at/CFOT2