Renewed by Renewables  
*Dylan Marando*

To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this lovingly, knowingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it greedily, clumsily, ignorantly, destructively, it is a desecration.


**Being Green is a Sin?**

In December of 2007, I had the privilege of being selected to represent the Green Party of Canada in the 2008 federal election. This experience was a source of personal excitement because I knew that it was an opportunity to participate in the democratic process and share my view about the need for our culture to achieve a more responsible and sustainable relationship with our environment. Naturally, I expected my new political project would be demanding and inspire some opposition. What I was not prepared for, however, was the reality of encountering intense confusion and suspicion from fellow Christians. Why, I was often asked, did I abandon my Christian roots and use my energies to support measures such as the development of Green technology? Christians, I was told, are not meant to care about worldly matters, to revere nature rather than simply use it, or to play God by trying to master nature and, for example, create new forms of energy production. Being Green, a fellow theology student explained, was sinful.

A second group of skeptics approached my involvement from an entirely different perspective. These people, rather than doubting Green technology, were enthusiastic supporters of the phenomenon. Their doubts concerned the power of Christianity to be friendly to nature, science, and technology. This group wondered if I knew one popular ecotheologian had said that
humanity would continue to have worsening ecological crises until we reject [traditional Christian values], and then went even further by claiming one of the fundamental Christian axioms was that nature has no reason for existence [except] to serve man.

1 They brought to my attention the fact that the Second Vatican Council had said: technical progress is of less value than progress towards, justice, peace, and a more humane social environment (Gaudium et Spes 35) and that the respected priest and theologian Professor Denis Edwards had stated technological society was one of the major contributors to the ecological crises. 2 Given the statements made by students both in support of and against my running for the Green Party, I began to feel that I was trapped in an ecological, technological, and theological paradox.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that the intellectual maze in which I became lost did indeed have an end, and this end ought to be a source of solidarity and hope for those who engage seriously with Christianity and the wider world. More specifically, the essay will show that supporting at least one of the most fundamental components of the Green movement—efforts to develop new energy efficient technologies—is not a contradiction of Christian values, notwithstanding the fact some of the other Green policies may very well be. Rather, new Green technologies are a perfect Christian compromise that can bring together groups which may be strictly separated along other policy lines, such as those concerning definitions of marriage and reproductive rights; in so doing, it gives these groups a reason to cooperate and potentially achieve compromise in other areas of practice. Indeed, as I shall show, even when comparing two dissimilar and polarized Christian denominations that both appear at first glance to be particularly hard test cases for a Christian defending environmental technology, the unifying
power of green technology endures, possibly suggesting an ability to also unify the various
groups in between. Though Green technology appears to be an innovative and fashionable
concept that is on the lips of myriad interests groups which have historically entered into
adversarial relationships with Christianity, we shall discover that this phenomenon is certainly
not another example of a contemporary effort to divide or erode traditional Christian principles.
It is a timely and versatile bridge, which has the potential to close the seemingly growing gaps
between Christians and Christians, Christians and culture, and Christians and creation.

This essay will use sustainable energy systems as an example of green technology, and
will use scripture, official ecclesial documents, and theological treatises to defend its thesis.
Moreover, and perhaps most interestingly, this essay will compare and contrast the Roman
Catholic and Old Order Amish understanding of nature and stewardship when assessing the
validity of the claim that there is a significant point of entry for Christians willing to wrestle with
green issues. Crucially, these denominations represent two very unique Christian perspectives
which are often placed on opposite sides of the spiritual spectrum. They are also examples of
groups that share a consistent willingness to immerse themselves in ecological and technological
controversies. Among the primary aspirations of this essay is an effort to illustrate how easy it is
to fill the large theological chasm between these parties when using the environment as a starting
point, and thus inspire the reader to use a shared concern for the environment to strengthen other
attempts at Christian ecumenism.

What Do Christians Say about Nature?

In Religion and the New Ecology John F. Haught begins his exploration of theological
approaches to nature by recognizing that many people are cynical about the relationship between
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Christianity and the natural world. Haught explains that some thinkers, such as philosopher John Passmore, believe it is doubtful that Christianity can do anything to protect the environment because belief in God and the next world softens our obligation to this world and gives rise to an implicit hostility toward nature. Other thinkers, such as the pioneer ecotheologian Lynn White, argue that Christianity is incapable of sustainable ecological activism because it is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen and has established a dualism between man and nature that suggests it is the will of God for humanity to exploit nature. Christianity, in other words, is often considered inherently opposed to environmentalism and, therefore, considered to have a negative view of nature. Haught, a Roman Catholic Professor of Theology, responds to these criticism by arguing that, in fact, the contrary is true. He believes that a proper investigation of biblical faith shows that the natural world is inherently good.

God’s claim that the totality of his creation is very good (Genesis 1:31) and God’s command to till and keep the earth (Genesis 2:15), for example, have been accepted as obvious expressions of commands to respect nature. Catholic theologians are also examining the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans and wondering if its assertion that all of creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (Romans 8:22) actually demonstrates the crucial role of nature in the eschaton. This statement, Haught suggests, reveals, eschatology, in its widest and deepest meaning implies that a resplendent fulfillment awaits the entire universe, including nature. These views are often complemented by the recognition that Saint Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart and Gerard Manley Hopkins are all examples of Christians who have a profound love of nature. Anna Peterson has argued that even Augustine, though he was influenced by dualistic tendencies and is not considered to be an
ideal model for Christian environmentalists, explicitly rejected the notion that the earth and body are essentially fallen and said, "all of creation is a revelation of God's goodness." Similarly, in the *Summa Theologica* we find Saint Thomas Aquinas declaring that "the whole community of the universe is governed by the divine reason and, therefore, everything that in any way is, is from God." These convictions, when viewed in the light of the Catholic belief that God is a good and benevolent being, would suggest that nature is fundamentally good, because if what God creates is good, and God created nature, then nature is good. The Roman Catholic Church, it seems, has a profound respect for the integrity of the natural world. There is not an implicit hostility toward nature in their attitude; there is, throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church, an explicit appreciation and even reverence for nature.

The work of Denis Edwards is a classic example of the deep ecology within Christianity. He has made the provocative argument that in the twenty-first century Christianity can and needs to embrace a mysticism of ecological praxis. He states that "commitment to the poor and commitment to the well-being of life on this planet must go together as two interrelated dimensions of the one Christian vocation." Pope John Paul II was generally sympathetic toward such a position. He shared the conviction that respect for and protection of our environment is an essential Christian task. He said that Christians, because of their faith, should be more concerned about the environment. He also observed that there is a lack of due respect for nature and that the ecological crisis is a moral issue. Though the comments of John Paul II and other prominent members of Roman Catholic Church are more anthropocentric than Lynn White would want them to be, there is nevertheless a clear reverence for nature, and this reverence has the potential to lead to a more responsible management of natural resources. Prominent Roman Catholic Church, an explicit appreciation and even reverence for nature.
Catholics, because of their spirituality, feel more, not less connected to the whole of creation. They have consistently expressed the belief that they have an obligation to protect the totality of the gift they have been given by God. The real question is whether or not this view exists only in Roman Catholicism or if it can be reconciled with other Christian traditions? For example, can it be reconciled the Amish conception of nature?

It would seem, on first examination, that it is actually extremely difficult to reconcile Roman Catholic and Old Order Amish understandings of nature. Within the Amish tradition there is a strong and explicit dualistic impulse and this sentiment makes the Amish a generally exclusive community trying to remain separate from an evil world.\(^{13}\) Obviously the conspicuous presence of a notion of evil has the potential to weaken the environmental optimism expressed by many Catholics.

When one looks deeper into the Amish tradition, however, it is not difficult to discover that the presence of a notion of evilness is no more damaging to the Amish theology of ecology than the doctrine of original sin in Roman Catholicism. The dualism of the Amish is not between the church and nature; it is between the people in the community and the culture outside of the community. The Amish recognize the authority of scripture and adhere to basic Christian doctrines.\(^{14}\) They would not deny that God called his creation very good or that humanity was given the task of cultivating the natural world. They would recognize that nature is the consequence of a good and generous Creator. The Dordrecht Confession of Faith\(^{15}\) is a significant theological treatise for most Old Order Amish churches, and in that Confession we find the declaration that the one eternal, almighty, and incomprehensible God is the Creator of all things visible and invisible.\(^{15}\) The Confession continues stating that the creation of God was
good and upright, according to His pleasure.\textsuperscript{16} This statement is essentially the same belief that dominates the Roman Catholic understanding of the goodness of creation. It reveals a genuine respect for all of creation, including that which is not part of humanity.

Another example of an Amish environmental impulse can be found in the notion \textit{Gelassenheit}, a German word meaning submission to a higher authority. According to Bennett, this idea is central to the Amish way of life and leads the Amish to strive for the virtues of humility, obedience, submission, thrift, and simplicity.\textsuperscript{17} These virtues also indicate respect for nature because they oppose the spirit of mastery that many accuse Christian denominations of being guilty of. It is extremely difficult to find clearly articulated, formal Amish theologies of ecology; however, the probable reason for such apparent ambiguity is that there is no real need for the Amish to have a theology of ecology. Their basic Amish theology is so reverential about existence and so simple from the modern perspective, that particular statements about ecology are unnecessary. It is clear that the Amish are neither growth- nor consumption-oriented and the community lifestyle of the Old Order Amish is both traditional and modest.\textsuperscript{18} They are a people that act in a way that suggests they take extreme measures to evade environmental exploitation. Though it is true that there are a variety of reasons why they undertake such activity,\textsuperscript{19} one cannot deny that their way of life cannot be separated from conservation of nature. One member of the Old Order Amish Society has said, We farm the way we do because we believe in nurturing and supporting all of our community that includes people as well as land and wildlife.\textsuperscript{20}

In summary, the Christian understanding of nature is diverse and has been expressed differently at different points in time and in different communities. Nevertheless, the view that
nature is something good, something created by God, and something we should take seriously is an essential element of Christian ecology. How, Christians must now ask themselves, does this view affect our lives? What does it mean to take the environment seriously? Does it merely mean that one should reduce one's impact on nature, or does it entail proactive conservation?

Where Does Stewardship and Technology Belong in the Theology of Ecology?

There are a considerable number of Christians tempted to argue that taking the environment seriously consists simply of an abandonment of the modern world, a life of extreme simplicity and a life separated from science and technology. Conservation, for these Christians, is the key to a proper response to the natural world. Interestingly, however, from the Christian notion of the goodness of creation emerges a commitment to a relationship with nature that is not characterized primarily by the notion of conservation. Though the relationship does involve a flavor of environmental conservatism, it is best described as stewardship. The idea of stewardship helps communicate the reality that Christian ecology is about more than simply observing nature and moving a safe distance from it. Christian ecology is about cultivating and caring for creation, not being afraid of getting dirt under one's fingernails, and acknowledging that reverence is not enough. Stewardship is motivated by the recognition that, rather than promoting passive witness of nature, the creation accounts found in the Bible emphasize the connectedness and cooperation of creator and that which is creaturely. Christians, the spirit of stewardship reveals, are called to be co-creators with God.

Rene Dubos has argued that stewardship is deeply rooted in Christian history and was best realized by Saint Benedict of Nursia. Saint Benedict, according to Dubos, believed that true conservation means not only protecting nature against human misbehavior but also developing
human activities which favor a creative harmonious, relationship between man and nature. Dubos explains that All types of Benedictine monasteries were involved in technological activities and the monks developed wind and water mills as a source of power. These spiritual heroes had an unusual willingness to move beyond the monastic undertaking of contemplation and to wrestle with nature. They were active, they used technologies, and they were leaders in the effort to achieve progress. Edwards is a modern Roman Catholic who attempts to sustain this Benedictine tradition. He is confident that in the Christian tradition there is a notion that human beings are part of an unfolding of creation and called to participate responsibly in the dynamism of ongoing creation. It is perfectly Christian, according to Edwards, to believe that just as human ingenuity has been used to plunder the natural world, so humans can use their God-given creativity and intelligence to bring healing to the earth and its creatures. There is nothing wrong, in other words, with being involved with creation.

Moreover, if science and technology are simply i) an effort to read from the book of nature; and ii) human productive manufacturing is designed to modify nature in a way that reveals truth, as Martin Heidegger has suggested, then there is absolutely nothing wrong with science or technology from a Christian-environmentalist point of view. Christians, in short, are stewards of God’s mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:1), and being an active and rational agent in the world allows the Christian to understand and share those mysteries.

The first and fifty-seventh sections of Gaudium et Spes reflect this spirit of obligatory involvement in the world. In the first section the Council Fathers remark that the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well (Gaudium et Spes 1). In the fifty-seventh section
they go on to assert, ‘when man develops the earth with the aid of technology he carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself (Gaudium et Spes 57)’. When these statements are viewed together and in the light of the essential goodness of all of creation, we can identify a deliberately constructed tension in Roman Catholic theology, which aims for harmony between what is happening now and what could be happening. We see the implicit conviction that ‘creativity can bring nature to a higher degree of perfection’ and that, as Richard Niebuhr has argued, part of being fully human involves ‘qualified participation with creation which ‘breaks the forms of nature and creates new configurations of vitality.’ Comments of this nature are surely surprising to the environmentally conservative Christians mentioned above, and White would argue that they are proof of a dangerous anthropocentricism. Nevertheless, they are a reality and what one must determine is if these views are detrimental to the conservation of the environment. Do suggestions that nature will inevitably be transformed by human activity contradict what we saw early with regards to the inherent goodness of nature as created by God? What do the Old Order Amish say?

Again, the environmentally conservative Christian will be surprised to learn that the Amish are not opposed to the principle of stewardship. In fact, it is plainly ‘false to suggest the Amish reject technology and live in a nineteenth-century cocoon.’ According to Donald B. Kraybill, ‘the Amish adopt technology selectively, hoping that the tools they use will build community rather than harm it.’ Amish people are very aware of the need for a spirit of stewardship and creativity, because they accept that ‘technology can serve the community without dominating it.’ Though what Kraybill identifies as selectiveness other people are inclined to identify as
consistent and arbitrary exclusion, the fact of the matter is that, in principle, the Amish are not hostile to technology. The Amish use technology every time they farm, build a house, or even when they use a horse and carriage to visit the local market. They typically use a more primitive technology; but they are using technology nonetheless.

Eric Brende is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a Masters degree in Science, Technology, and Society. In 1996 he became a member of an Amish community and claimed he felt completely at home following his move. He suggests that one of the things he respected most about his community members was their “sense of connection to the material world.” He explains that “at times the Amish actually promote technological development; they do this, however, after a trial period in which they assess the effects.” Brende says, “Even though traditionalism may prevail often the tradition itself is one of tinkering, adaptation, and innovation.” Stewardship, therefore, is at the heart of the Amish experience, and the overt, rigorous, and traditional rituals often criticized by outsiders actually demonstrate a deep stewardship. The Old Order Amish must produce and wear certain types of clothing, they must gather and worship in a particular way, and they must speak a particular language, use particular methods of transportation and produce agriculture in a particular way. They actually get their fingernails dirty, and they actually till and keep the land. These practices are technological— they are ways of shaping what has been given in order to achieve an end. The extreme confidence with which they are done point to an appreciation for stewardship, that is to say, an appreciation for the idea that when we work we respond to God using the instruments of technology.
Both the Roman Catholic and Amish expressions of Christianity, it seems, agree that our existence is part of a dialogue with God. They agree that God is always demanding a response from us. Each tradition, because it has a love for creation, knows that it have a gift that its members must do something with. In fact, both traditions are inherently nourished by technology. The mere action of producing a theological treatise, speculating on which technologies should and should not be accepted, and developing a procedure to select a theology or technology, is technological. The real problem within the traditions and between the traditions is finding a common ground. What are acceptable Christian technologies? How do you balance a reverence for nature and an enthusiasm for stewardship? If technology is a way of working with God, is it possible for Christians to agree on a particular mode of labor? Though the traditions share skepticism about the myth of progress, evidently their shared conviction has had a very different effect. What about Green technologies and Green energy? Is it possible that Green energy is permitted within the boundaries of Christian theology and is a rare, potentially spiritually significant, and unifying force in the Christian tradition?

Is Green Energy a Perfect Christian Compromise?

For reasons that are not always apparent, it is fashionable for Christians and scientists to create a permanent division between religious objectives and applications of science. Consequently, it is popular to suggest that, in modern times, the idea of reconciling the Christian love of creation with technological progress is absurd. Paul Abrecht, for example, has argued that today, as a result [of the rapid progress of modern science], science and science-based technology are on the defensive, and religious faith, speaking in the name of troubled and anxious humanity, has begun to ask questions about the consequences of the scientific world-
Abrecht, in essence, has expressed the belief that science and religion are sometimes opponents. People that use his logic often feel that, though one can isolate certain instances of Christians praising creation and Christians praising stewardship in the form of technology, it is not possible, today, for Christians to make both claims at the same time. Where, one might protest, is an example of Christians expressing a desire to use a specific modern technology, and how can Christians do this and be consistent with their conviction to respect the integrity of creation?

Abrecht and other skeptics will be delighted to learn that renewable energy systems—new and sophisticated technologies that have generated remarkable support from the right and left—have been warmly embraced by many Christians. Energy systems such as geothermal energy, tidal power, solar power, and wind power are abundant, can be harnessed practically anywhere, and have relatively no or little negative environmental impacts. They have the potential to help us reduce harmful carbon dioxide emissions and to improve energy efficiency and affordability. They are designed to productively use what God has given without exhausting God’s gift. For these reasons, Celestino Migliore, a Roman Catholic Archbishop and Permanent Observer of the Vatican to the United Nations, has strongly encouraged world leaders to develop and use renewable energy. He has said that energy is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century and that there must be serious discussions regarding the means by which states can provide incentives for the further development of renewable energy sources. Migliore boldly remarks: The world is going to need dramatically more, not less, energy in the next fifty years: we owe it to future generations everywhere to start immediately on such a path.
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Statements such as these are powerful reminders that Christians are not opposed to progress and technological development. Christians can be leaders in the effort to achieve both of those objectives if the circumstances are right. They can accept the biblical goodness of creation and the need for the Church to enter into dialogue with the world. They can reflect on the principles of Benedictine stewardship and the command of John Paul II to transform environmental rhetoric into concrete programs and initiatives. They can, moreover, do this through their support of renewable energy—a technology which has the potential to help us sustain our efforts to till without working against our efforts to keep. A technology that allows for what the United States Catholic Conference calls both a sense of limits and a sense of experimentation, and a commitment to care for creation according to standards that are not of our own making; a commitment to be resourceful in finding ways to make the earth flourish.

Renewable energy truly is a perfect Christian compromise. Pope Benedict XVI, who has been laudably labeled the "green pope" by popular media outlets and who can claim to live in the only sovereign state that is carbon-neutral, seems to have recognized the highly compatible relationship between the Christian understanding of nature, technology, and Green energy. In a recent encyclical, Caritas in Veritate, the Pope devotes a chapter to the subject of the environment and makes frequent reference to the need to be respectful to the natural environment which is described as God's gift to everyone (Caritas Veritate 48). In November of 2008 the Vatican inaugurated its new solar power energy system by placing 2,400 photovoltaic panels on the roof of the building where Pope Benedict XVI holds his weekly general audience. The new solar energy system is part of a twelve-year plan that will shift the
Vatican’s energy dependence to various forms of renewable energy for at least twenty percent of its total energy.\(^5^1\)

The Roman Catholic Church, however, is not the only Christian denomination using alternative energy technologies. The Old Order Amish, since the beginning of their spiritual journey, have been developing ways to enhance their quality of life and evade popular traditional energy sources at the same time. A recent example of Amish ingenuity is the way in which the Amish responded to their struggle with electricity from public utility lines. During that experience, which was motivated mainly by a desire to stay separate from the outside world and not by an ecological impulse, many Amish were determined to explore other alternatives and eventually Amish Electricity was generated. According to Kraybill, [t]his new technology, which consisted of the use of hydraulic and air pressure, followed the Amish to modernize by preserving tradition and permitting progress.\(^5^2\)

Presently, this Amish inventiveness has been complemented by the classic Amish aversion to reckless use of natural resources. A publication from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies explains, increasingly the Amish are using solar panels to power electric fences, buggy lights, sewing machines, refrigerators, and work tools, tapping into what one Amish expert called God’s grid.\(^5^3\) In an October 2008 edition of *The Christian Science Monitor* Mary Beth McCauley announced, The Amish go solar and in a separate article for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Fabian Lohe said, the plain-living Amish are leading the way when it comes to embracing solar energy (emphasis added)\(^5^4\). McCauley explains that in regions of Pennsylvania sales of solar systems to the Amish are up 30 percent to 50 percent [in 2008] and that, according to one commentator, this highly advanced and modern form of renewable energy
is attractive because solar is considered very natural. It making use of an alternative energy that God-given. The phenomenon, from the Amish perspective, is a way of balancing that sense of connection to the material world and the tradition of tinkering, adaptation, and innovation. It is not an abandonment of respect for creation or a rejection of a need to work with the Creator. The Amish use of renewable energy is a graceful effort to balance such views; it is an effort to escape from one of many Christian paradoxes by building a bridge between Christians and creation.

The Old Order Amish and Roman Catholics recognize that renewable energy can provide Christians with some reliable ground on which to take their next steps. In some ways, it is one of the few things Christians can be confident about in a rapidly changing world. Contemporary Christians are being encouraged to move in many different directions. Some are being encouraged to concentrate on a life of contemplation and a life separated from the world. Others are being encouraged to join the forces of social activism and respond to the extreme poverty, discrimination, and suffering they witness daily. Most Christians, however, realize that neither life is possible without being open to the other. They realize the danger of extremism and the value of unity. Renewable energy is that common ground that ignores apathy and hubris and simply uses what God has given. It is a way to respect nature and stewardship. It is a way to care for and to cultivate. It is the perfect Christian compromise between our impulse to protect and our impulse to master creation.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Pope John Paul II suggested that the ecological crisis reveals a need for a new moral solidarity and he asserted that his need presents new opportunities for strengthening
cooperative and peaceful relations. The above essay has been an attempt to show that, from a Christian perspective, such a spirit of unity must happen between Christians and creation. New Green technology is a bridge by which these and other entities can meet. It is both a rejection of the deeply exploitive character of existing technologies, and a means by which believers in Christ can continue to fulfill their role as co-creators with God. Green technology can be seen as an instrument used by humanity to participate in a divine dialogue. Not surprisingly, some Christians will continue to doubt the value of technology and even the importance of protecting our environment. When such skepticism emerges the proper Christian response is to remind the interlocutors of the biblical goodness of creation and the biblical connectedness and cooperation of creator and that which is creaturely. Christians have a duty to be responsible stewards of what God has made, and though members of the Christian tradition sometimes reject what is popular, now is the time to recognize the requirement to care for those in need, to heal, perhaps even to counter the negative consequences of our fallen world.

The decision of Christianity to embrace Green technology is an opportunity for it to renew itself and return to its role as leader in the effort to establish peace and justice in the world. It is a chance to till it and keep it (Gen 2:15). Will Christians respond to this call? Gottlieb has suggested that it is absolutely crucial for religion to become a leader in the modern environmental movement because for many people religious beliefs provide primary values concerning our place in the universe, our obligations to other people and other life forms, and what makes up a truly good life. Christians must recognize their duty.
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