

## Religion and African American Environmental Activism

MARK STOLL

In October 1991, three hundred delegates gathered in Washington DC for the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Among the first to address the audience gathered in the conference room of the Washington Court Hotel were the leaders of two of the most prominent national environmental organizations: Michael Fischer, executive director of the Sierra Club, and John Adams, executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council. Both these white men took great pains to profess their sympathy for the environmental problems of minorities, confess their organizations' historical failure to address minority issues, and assert the need for environmental racial unity. Often, said Fischer, the Sierra Club had been "conspicuously missing from the battles for environmental justice," but now was "here to reach across the table and to build the bridge of partnership with all of you." For his part, Adams also offered a "partnership" with minorities in fighting toxic waste, and concluded, "You can't win this battle alone."

Dana Alston, leading organizer of the summit, responded in an impassioned speech. An activist in poverty and racial issues since she served as president of the Black Student Organization at Wheelock College in the 1960s, Alston was a staff member of Panos Institute hired to develop a program relating to domestic environmental justice issues. She later went on to become program officer for the environment at the Public Welfare Foundation, and, since her untimely death in 1999, has come to be widely recognized for her

important work in the environmental justice movement as well as her broader social activism. Alston did not speak directly to these representatives of the overwhelmingly white mainstream environmental movement. Environmentalism to her made sense only when put in a different context. "For us," she said, "the issues of the environment do not stand alone by themselves. They are not narrowly defined. Our vision of the environment is woven into an overall framework of social, racial, and economic justice."<sup>1</sup>

From one perspective, Alston had essentially rebuffed the proffered olive branch. Indeed, the speakers even seemed to be speaking different languages, the language of nature issues and the language of social issues. In fact, African Americans long have overwhelmingly responded to mainstream environmentalism in a way very similar to Alston's. Take, for instance, Carl Anthony, who is about as well connected with mainstream environmentalism as anybody, black or white: he is former president of David Brower's Earth Island Institute, a founder and former director of Urban Habitat, keynote speaker at the 1999 meeting of the American Society for Environmental History, and current program officer of the Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Initiative of the Ford Foundation. Even Anthony betrays a skeptical and cynical tone when discussing environmental issues that whites get passionate about. In an interview with Theodore Roszak about "ecopsychology," Anthony clearly could barely keep his patience, linking ecopsychology with something to him about as useless, deep ecology:

Deep Ecology is in touch with something, but the desire of a tiny fraction of middle- and upper-class Europeans to hear the voice of the Earth could be in part a strategy by people in these social classes to amplify their *own* inner voice at a time when they feel threatened, not only by the destruction of the planet, but also by the legitimate claims of multicultural human communities clamoring to be heard. . . . Why is it so easy for these people to think like mountains and not be able to think like people of color? . . .

For their part, such mainstream environmental organizations as the Sierra Club have found it frustratingly difficult to get people of color to think like mountains. Anthony did acquire a growing appreciation of the John Muir tradition in his association with Brower and like-minded people, but he remarked in a 1999 interview, "I think that there is a fundamental problem within the John Muir mythology, for all that it's contributed—and it's contributed a lot—and that is that somehow we can save nature by separating it from human activity." In 1997 Anthony resigned as president and left the

Earth Island Institute over his white colleagues' resistance to the integration of social justice and environmental issues in the national forests of northern New Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, this issue is anything but new. Two decades earlier, on Earth Day 1970, there was talk that environmental issues crossed class and racial lines, certainly a soothing notion after the tumult of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Yet in 1972, when the Conservation Foundation sponsored a three-day seminar entitled "Environmental Quality and Social Justice," leaders from the Sierra Club and other environmental groups met with union, urban, and minority representatives, and their remarks uncannily foreshadowed those of the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. According to the opening speaker, Illinois state senator Richard Newhouse of Chicago, "The urban social movement has been concerned with housing, welfare, unemployment, and youth problems. Insofar as the people in those activities are concerned, there is absolutely no connection between what they see as an environmental movement and what their problems are all about. . . . The conservation movement is much the same as women's lib and all the rest of the elitist operations that have come into being since people got sick and tired of fighting for the rights of black people."<sup>4</sup> Much of the discussion at the seminar dealt with building the bridges and fostering the cooperation that Fischer and Adams would talk about in 1991. In the same year, 1972, at the first United Nations Conference on the Environment, held in Stockholm, intense discussion between Western and postcolonial nations produced a declaration that insisted as its leading principle, before discussion of resources or pollution: "Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. In this respect, policies promoting or perpetuating apartheid, racial segregation, discrimination, colonial and other forms of oppression and foreign domination stand condemned and must be eliminated."<sup>5</sup> Despite early national and international recognition of the necessary connection between social justice and the environment, almost twenty years of American environmental activism had narrowed the gap between environmentalist and African American concerns very little, if at all.

The irony is, of course, that environmentalists in general tend to be among the most broad-minded, well-meaning, politically progressive white people. The lack of people of color in the environmental movement has been a point of embarrassment to them since the 1960s. Yet even when white environmentalists invited local black activists to join in campaigns for parks and conservation, blacks often declined to take part. For example, Cora Tucker, who won

national recognition when she organized local resistance to toxic waste dumps in her heavily black southern Virginia county, was asked to join in demonstrations to save a local park:

This white woman from an environmental group asked me to come down to save a park. She said that they had been trying to get black folks involved and that they won't come. I said, "Honey, it's not that they aren't concerned, but when their babies are dying in their arms they don't give a damn about a park." I said, "They want to save their babies. If you can help them save their babies, then in turn they can help you save your park." And she said, "But this is a real immediate problem." And I said, "Well, these people's kids dying is immediate."<sup>6</sup>

Despite efforts to broaden the movement, environmentalism continues to have such a low profile in the black community that it constitutes barely a blip on the radar screen of black concerns. In editions of *The African American Almanac*, for instance, or any other standard African American encyclopedias or reference books, environmental issues merit barely a mention, a paragraph at most, and often do not appear in any form in the index. That more than two decades have passed since one-time reverend Benjamin Chavis coined the term and popularized the concept of "environmental racism" must surely add to the frustration of mainstream environmental groups. On the other hand, it is not the case that blacks do not care about the environment. The Congressional Black Caucus, for example, has one of the best environmental voting records on Capitol Hill. Why then does this gap between environmentalists and blacks exist, and why has it continued for decades, virtually impervious to all attempts to bridge it?<sup>7</sup>

There are many possible approaches to answering this question, because the issue is bound up with black historical experience in a nation that has always denied African Americans full equality and opportunity; with longtime black concerns and attitudes; and with the characteristic black moral viewpoint. In all of these—experience, goals, moral perspective—African Americans contrast with white environmentalists.

All of these are also intimately tied up with the history of the African American church. It represents a lens through which shine clearly and sharply the actions, perceptions, and moral assumptions that have historically guided and shaped African American politics and social action. The main issues of black history and politics, from abolitionism to civil rights to environmental justice, cannot be separated from the power and influence of the institution of the black church and of the peculiar realities of black Protestantism. The church was virtually the only institution to survive slavery intact. It was the

center of the black community throughout the long night of Jim Crow segregation. It continues to be the single most important black institution in America today. The church has supplied most historical black leaders, who tended to be either ordained or very religious, including, for example, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton, among many others. Benjamin Chavis himself was then a minister in the United Church of Christ. As the center of black communities across the South, the church has often played an essential role in organizing resistance to toxic waste dumps and toxic pollution. In Halifax County, Virginia, community activist Cora Tucker, a very religious member of the Crystal Hills Baptist Church, organized the black community through local churches to fight a nuclear waste dump in 1986. Local activists in Texarkana, Texas, used the Mount Zion Baptist Church to inform and organize a black neighborhood to act out against the poisoned soil upon which it sat. Black churches have played a role in community after community in rallying and organizing against environmental dangers.<sup>8</sup>

The centrality of religion to African American environmental activism stands out in strong contrast to other comparable social groups. Despite the examples of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, no other ethnic, social, or religious group has as strong a tradition of clerical political activism. A most instructive comparison can be made with poor southern whites, who have had a similar economic status, who have also attended Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches, and who occasionally have made political common cause with blacks, as in the Populist Party of the nineteenth century. Yet poor whites do not have a similar strong tradition of ministerial leadership and have rarely, if at all, organized their communities against the siting of toxic dumps or polluting industry. Lower-class southern white churches have played little significant positive role in local environmental activism.

While in the twentieth century many competing institutions have developed, in black communities, especially in the South, the church remains the communal heart. As such, it expresses central black values, and has been the locus for tensions in community and religion between radicalism, political activity, and resistance on one hand, and accommodation, otherworldliness, and the charismatic on the other. As Frederick C. Harris has noted, the "relatively mainstream" black churches—which currently comprise the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian (formerly "Colored") Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., and the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.—have played a contradictory role in black history. These churches "serve[d] as a source of civic culture by giving African Americans the oppor-

tunities to practice organizing and civic skills and to develop positive orientations toward the civic order." Yet they also made available the resources and mind-set to oppose oppression in ways that aimed for inclusion in society and politics and rejected political violence and separatist black nationalism. By nurturing both civic culture and an oppositional mentality, black mainstream churches empowered believers by encouraging their self-worth and promoted and facilitated political and economic activism within the system.<sup>9</sup>

Just as importantly, black churches have always been politically active—"the most activist sector of American religion," according to political scientist Robert Booth Fowler. In the words of Cora Tucker, "The real organized groups in the United States are churches." The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) have all relied on churches for support and participation. The NAACP often met in churches after Sunday services. The civil rights movement in the South drew strength, nourishment, and material support from an already existing network of churches. So much were they centers of agitation and protest during the civil rights era that at least ninety-three were bombed or burned between 1962 and 1965. According to one analysis, "African-American politics has always had and continues to have a decidedly religious slant, while African-American religion is deeply political." In a *Detroit News-Gannett News Service* poll of blacks in the early 1990s, a majority thought black churches met their needs more effectively than the NAACP, the National Urban League, the SCLC, or the Congress of Racial Equality, and 63 percent felt that black churches should "spend more time" on social and economic problems of the community. When politicians, black or white, seek the black vote, they visit black churches and woo the black clergy.<sup>10</sup>

Among the historically central themes of African American religion are the key ideas of blacks as a people apart, chosen by God, and of the search for social justice as the goal of moral action. The distinctiveness of the African American church arose from the interplay of three historical factors: a generalized African cultural influence lacking boundaries between religion, politics, and culture; a heritage of exploitation and injustice based on race; and the enduring character of the church as an institution. Take, for instance, the central role of the minister in southern black communities. In Africa, each village viewed its ruler as the supreme priest who ruled by favor of God. Africans required exemplary moral character of rulers because of a perceived correspondence between his character and the community's well-being. African Americans transferred the spirit of African kingship to the clergy. W. E. B. DuBois called the "Priest or Medicine-man" the most significant institution to survive

the voyage from Africa: "He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people."<sup>11</sup> Because churches were blacks' primary institutions, ministers took on an essentially political role to become leaders of local communities, often due to their charismatic and oratorical skills, and acquired great social status and some material benefit. The duties of these leaders revolved around the maintenance of harmony with God, and with whites. As de facto community leaders, black ministers had no qualms about giving political sermons or, when possible, acting in the political arena themselves. Note that both major African American presidential candidates, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, are ordained ministers.<sup>12</sup>

The political orientation of black churches similarly grows from African and American roots. Like many premodern religions, African religion assumed a unity of the sacred and profane. Music, dance, and stories found their place in work and play as well as religion, and continue to find a place in contemporary African American Christianity. In the early nineteenth century, slaves circumvented religious prohibitions against dancing by a half-dance known as the "ring shout," in which participants would half shuffle, half walk in a circle to the rhythm of religious song, often all night long. Despite white denunciations that such behavior was "heathenish," "savage," and "barbaric," black congregations moved, swayed, and clapped while singing in church. White understanding of the separation of behavior appropriate to the spheres of church and the world found no counterpart in black culture. African Americans have also never hesitated to see political meaning in biblical stories. When slaves heard these narratives, most particularly those from the Old Testament, they interpreted them politically. The God of Moses and the Hebrews was a liberator deity who freed oppressed peoples and opposed the oppressors.<sup>13</sup>

Among the churches, these themes have historically manifested themselves most notably in the "relatively mainstream" churches, which all trace their origins to the days of slavery or Reconstruction. Black Methodist and Baptist ministers have long been social and political activists, and although their theology and ecclesiology differ, their social thought is the same. Members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black denomination, were early abolitionists and have a strong tradition of racial consciousness. In addition, Methodists have always concerned themselves with social services, education, and social justice. (White Methodists, too, share an ethic of social concern, exemplified by their strong support in all parts of the coun-

try for the Social Gospel of the early twentieth century.) Examples of leading black Methodist activists are many: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McCleod Bethune (graduate of Moody Bible Institute and would-be missionary to Africa) were devout Methodists; Frederick Douglass was a licensed preacher, the three major black revolts of the nineteenth century, the Prosser, Vesey, and Turner revolts, were all associated with black Methodists; Reverend Hiram Revels was the first black senator in Congress during Reconstruction, joined in politics by several other clergymen; Reverend Oliver Leon Brown sued the Topeka Board of Education to integrate the school system; and Methodist civil rights activist James Farmer had a divinity degree.

Traditional Baptist congregational independence—and the vast majority of rural southern black churches are Baptist—made Baptist pastors, especially of large congregations, less vulnerable to civil and economic suppression, and hence leaders in political activity and community advocacy. The Baptist church has supplied a preponderant number of civil rights leaders as well as the majority of membership in civil rights organizations. Booker T. Washington functioned as an unordained Baptist preacher. Martin Luther King Jr., King's father, and his maternal grandfather, all Baptist ministers, were also all social or political activists. Large urban Baptist churches might also provide social services, such as New York's Abyssinian Baptist under Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and his son, the latter of who was also active in politics and served in the House of Representatives. The leadership of the SCLC was heavily Baptist, and Baptist ministers led the campaign against segregation in the civil rights era. Soon after Reverend Al Sharpton was precociously ordained a Pentecostal minister at age ten, his mother began taking him to Bethany Baptist Church, a politically very active congregation in Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York City whose pastor, Reverend William A. Jones Jr., assumed a mentorship role for the boy and set him on the path of politics and protest.<sup>14</sup>

Among other black denominations and clergy, the record of social and political activism has been more mixed, or lacking altogether. On the one hand, although comparatively small in number, black ministers in Presbyterian and Congregational churches (now the United Church of Christ, or UCC) have fought for racial and social justice since before the Civil War. Indeed, the UCC sponsored the study that first documented environmental racism in the 1980s, and sponsored both the First and Second People of Color Environmental Leadership Summits. On the other hand, sects like the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) have been too alienated and separatist to engage in mainstream politics, and Pentecostal and Holiness churches tend to be otherworldly, conservative, and apolitical. Of the Pentecostal churches, the

Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is today the largest and the most politically engaged. Nevertheless, no Black Muslim mosque or Pentecostal or Holiness church seems to have led a fight against environmental injustice. For example, when opposition developed to an incinerator in a mostly black neighborhood of Philadelphia, Black Muslims expressed initial interest and showed up for an early meeting, but never returned or participated in any political activities.<sup>15</sup>

Along with a strong tradition of church-based activism and clerical community leadership, African Americans have had a distinctive moral orientation. Black morality is a social morality. Africans had a reciprocal, covenantal relationship with their deities. God sustained and protected Africans in return for loyal obedience. As members of different African communities coexisted in New World plantations, where slavery and racism set blacks apart from white society, racial identity replaced previous affiliations. God now served the well-being of the race, and of any other people in covenant with him. Again, the Hebrew Bible, particularly the story of Exodus, inspired blacks to think of themselves as God's chosen people whom he would lead to the Promised Land—a well-established symbol from the sermons and spirituals of slaves to the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. In consequence, the well-being of the community was of the highest value. Individualism in the sense of autonomy from the community had no moral sanction in African values, and African American individualism never upheld the individual apart from the community. Black church services have always had many elements that reinforced the community: the vocal congregational responses to the chanted sermon; the call-and-response style of singing; the identification of the audience with soloist or preacher; and the communal creation of songs and spirituals in nineteenth-century churches and singing at all times.<sup>16</sup>

For two centuries, white observers have noted the extraordinary communal unity of feeling and emotion in black congregations, and often found themselves caught up in the mood despite themselves. In church, during the sermon and especially while singing, the individual became one with the community. Clifton Furness left a vivid description of a prayer meeting he attended in 1926 in the old slave cabins of a remote South Carolina plantation, at which he witnessed communal unity come alive and sacred song emerge. The preacher began speaking slowly, but gradually both tempo and intensity increased until he declared, "Gawd's lightnin' gwine strike! Gawd's thunder swaller de ert!"

Gradually moaning became audible in the shadowy corners where the women sat. Some . . . began swaying backward and forward. Several men moved their feet alternately, in strange syncopation. A rhythm was born,

almost without reference to the words that were being spoken by the preacher. It seemed to take shape almost visibly, and grow. I was gripped with the feeling of a mass-intelligence, a self-conscious entity, gradually informing the crowd and taking possession of every mind there, including my own.

Furness recounts that someone called out, "Git right—sodger! Git right—sodger! Git right—wit Gawd!"

Instantly the crowd took it up, moulding a melody out of half-formed familiar phrases based upon a spiritual tune. . . . A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent, shaping itself around the central theme of the words, "Git right, sodger!"

. . . The general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which . . . bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will.<sup>17</sup>

The black church also created a feeling of self-worth and empowerment that carried over into politics and society. This likely carries over from African practice, most especially in Baptist churches, whose extreme congregational polity along with white indifference toward black worship forms allowed African religious and ritual influences to survive more than in other churches. According to the influential analysis of Walter F. Pitts Jr., black Baptist rituals, chanted sermons, and songs not only transmitted African antecedents, they also imbued participants with divine assurance and the self-confidence born of doing the work of God. According to many who experienced it while speaking before a church audience, the chanted affirmations of "Well!" or "Hallelujah!" or "Isn't it the truth?" also gave a tremendous psychological boost to the speaker. This kind of communal self-affirmation gave the speaker a sense of elation, fluency, and power. This sense of power, of possibility, and of divine protection extended to believers as well. "God can make a way out of no way" is still a characteristic attitude of preachers and believers. It deflects any blame from themselves to outside forces and gives godly sanction to opposition to ungodly laws and mores. Many participants in the civil rights movement took with them divine assurance and confidence in divine justice as they went from the churches to the places of protest and action.

Other elements of black Protestantism served to heighten group identity and separation from whites. Blacks saw white religious services as cold and overly intellectual, and often asserted that shouting and emotion were essen-

tial to both salvation and proper worship. When forced during slavery to listen to white preachers, slaves amongst themselves would reject any parts of the ministers' message that rang untrue or conflicted with their own sense of God's justice. Blacks might rejoice at the prospect that the death of a particularly hated slave owner or white meant he or she would be going to eternal punishment. The coming apocalypse, when the innocent and suffering believer would be elevated over their oppressors, held strong appeal and gave comfort during the days of slavery and segregation.<sup>18</sup>

A common ancestry in Africa has also helped to unify blacks: Africa has come to represent the Promised Land for African Americans. This view results from an alienation of a landless race from the land, and therefore from the land myths that have animated European Americans from Jamestown and Plymouth Rock to the modern environmental movement. Herein lies another reason for the racial split in environmentalism. This land was *not* their land. This is not to say that the Promised Land has not at times had other metaphorical meanings for African Americans: during slavery it indicated the free states, in the late nineteenth century Kansas and Oklahoma, and then in the early twentieth century northern and western cities. Yet it is certainly true that nowhere in this country have African Americans felt a pride of full possession, of mythic origins tied to the soil, of confidence in a divine destiny manifest in the land itself, such as is symbolized for whites by Plymouth Rock, Yosemite Valley, or even Stone Mountain. While it is true that "wilderness" in general held meaning for blacks, particularly during slavery, as a place of freedom both for hunters and for runaways, a place of magic and spirits, a place for secret religious meetings, and a symbolic place in religion and sacred song, it never acquired a significance requiring its preservation or veneration. The great monuments of black sacred history are human, not natural, and the dominant metaphor has been Moses in the wilderness, not Adam in Paradise.<sup>19</sup>

The environmental justice movement, especially but not only in the South, yields numerous examples of all these aspects of black Protestant social morality and the central community roles of the minister and the church. At the environmental justice protest in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982, hundreds gathered every day for six weeks at the Coley Springs Baptist Church and marched to the dump to protest or block the trucks. Reverends Joseph Lowery of SCLC and Walter Fauntroy of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. (PNBC) joined the protests, and were arrested along with Reverend Benjamin Chavis of the UCC and Reverend Leon White, director of the North Carolina-Virginia field office of the UCC Commission for Racial Justice. From his experience there Chavis sponsored the United Church of Christ study that in 1987 brought attention to "environmental racism" in the

siting of dumps and polluting industries. In 1992, in a complicated and doomed fight against a waste-to-energy incinerator in the poor city of Chester, Pennsylvania, a black minister, Reverend Strand, cochaired the group Chester Residents Concerned for Quality of Life, which had been organized to oppose it, and Reverend Commodore Harris of the West End Ministerium also spoke in opposition. Aside from toxic dump and pollution issues, church activism has been so rare that the water conservation program of the First AME Church of Los Angeles to upgrade showerheads and toilets stands out.<sup>20</sup>

The National Council of Churches, in cooperation with the mainstream black denominations and COGIC, held a National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit in Washington DC in 1993. The summit sent six requests to Vice President Al Gore, including "the naming of a Black Church representative to the Sustainable Communities Task Force of the President's Council on Sustainable Development" and the "involvement of local Black church congregations in major environmental decisions undertaken by the administration." The summit issued a declaration that assumed the unity of social and ecological justice: "We, African-American Church leaders, historically committed to justice issues, affirm the unitary nature of life and commit ourselves to the ministry of converging justice and environmental issues that are critical matters of life and death for our Church and for our community." The summit created a Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Network, and the three black Methodist denominations joined the Environmental and Economic Justice Working Group.<sup>21</sup>

The dominant southern white Protestant ethic contrasts on environmental issues in nearly every respect. The South has historically had a very strong tradition of individualism. In the realm of religion this has produced churches that have a sect-type relationship with society—that is, they are apart from society, not identified with it—even as Baptist and Methodist churches, in particular, have strongly shaped white social attitudes and morality. White Protestants' belief is that society will only improve with the individual conversion of all of its members, and that a universal, personal, puritanical ethic will then solve all social problems. Until the evangelical resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s, itself the product of social, cultural, and demographic change, white churches and ministers tended to stay aloof from politics. In addition, white evangelicals incline toward conservatism, while black evangelicals lean towards liberalism. As a consequence, southern white evangelical churches have tended to oppose or ignore environmentalism and most social reform programs. Circumstances have never made the church the primary institution of white communities. The denomination that historically did try to encompass all of society, the Episcopal Church, was abandoned to a small number of

elite in the aftermath of the American Revolution and has little influence. In any case, the South has produced disproportionately few white environmentalist leaders, authors, or thinkers.<sup>22</sup>

Those northern churches with a Puritan or Lutheran pedigree—primarily the Congregational Church or UCC, Presbyterian Church, Unitarian Church, Disciples or Churches of Christ, American Baptist Church, and the Lutheran churches—produced various traditions that have strongly influenced the American environmental movement. Concisely put, the Puritan goal of a godly society shaped and guided by a partnership of minister and magistrate produced secular offspring in the form of the American social and political reform movements. Puritan Calvinist theology encouraged respect for wild nature as the direct creation of a good and wise Creator and the place where God draws nearest to us. Puritans therefore began a tradition of solitary meditation in natural settings. These ideas, nurtured by post-Calvinist churches and transmitted by post-Calvinist environmentalist heroes like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, continue to powerfully influence modern white environmental attitudes. Conveniently emptied of its original human inhabitants and regarded as the pure antithesis to exploitative American capitalist corporations and corrupt, degraded cities, the Edenic American landscape with its original flora and fauna thus has constituted a moral resource to be owned by the people and preserved in parks and reserves for the benefit of society. The anticapitalist, antiurban analysis tends to direct environmentalist attention away from analyses focusing on racism or urban problems.<sup>23</sup> Many of the churches in the Puritan and Lutheran traditions continue to place great emphasis on the protection of creation, although for the past three or four decades, churches and theologians in such liberal Protestant denominations as the UCC and Presbyterians have been drifting towards the social justice left.<sup>24</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that the black and white environmentalists have had difficulty communicating. African American environmentalists are most concerned with issues that directly impact their people. They often resemble "situation-environmentalists" motivated by simple "NIMBYism" ("Not in my backyard" campaigns), indifferent to environmental issues except for those that show up in their own communities or literally in their own backyards. They tend less to blame amoral, faceless capitalism than to blame decisions they allege deliberately or systematically target their communities and other communities of color. African American environmentalism has paid little attention to such issues as endangered species, nature parks (as opposed to urban parks), and nature preservation, which do not directly affect the black community. The moral discourse of environmental ethics comes in different

dialects, and mistranslations and misunderstandings will continue to be inevitable and divide the environmental movement.

Religion has served African Americans well in their environmental fights. It has supplied them with leaders, instilled confidence, and fired resolve. Their churches have become centers of organization and agitation, and their communal sense of social ethics and morality have given them a way of conceptualizing, identifying, and attacking toxic threats to their communities. However, the black church tradition as it emerged from the rural South is fragmenting and transforming. Most blacks do not live in small towns or rural southern areas any longer. The Great Migration of African Americans to urban areas shattered the communal identity and, with it, the near monopoly of the Baptist and Methodist churches. No one church could speak for the new huge black urban constituencies. Alienated and isolated by city life, blacks sought refuge in Pentecostal and, to a lesser degree, Black Muslim congregations. African American Catholicism, source of no conspicuous political activism, has also grown quickly. Essentially creations of urbanization, these groups together have surpassed the "mainstream" churches in numbers. Yet because of their pietistic or inward orientation, they have had little of the social and political influence of the older denominations. Unlike churches in the rural or small-town South, few churches in large urban areas have led or facilitated local fights for environmental justice. In any event, declining political activism has matched the declining numbers in mainstream denominations. The rise of Black Power and the death of Martin Luther King Jr. broke the confidence and purpose of church activists. Environmental justice has been but a faint echo of the glory days of the civil rights movement. A white environmental ethic founded on love of wild nature survived secularization of the Puritan tradition, and most likely so will the black environmental justice ethic grounded in a social morality. Carl Anthony himself epitomizes that evolution, in that as the agnostic son of a deeply religious, Bible-reading mother, he has ascribed his "very strong . . . sense of moral principles" to her influence.<sup>25</sup> No secular organization, however, is likely ever to replace the black rural church as the heart, soul, and voice of the black community, and the black environmental justice movement seems likely to suffer in the future as this traditional source of communal organization and mobilization steadily erodes.