Preaching Conservation to Andean Pentecostal Communities: A Case of Engaging Key Stakeholders of Religious Communities in Peruvian Tropical Forests

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Abstract

In Latin America, Pentecostal churches have an important presence in local Andean communities. I explored the opinions that rural people of the Pentecostal faith in the Peruvian Andes have on nature and conservation and tested the Evangelical principle of Creation Care as an effective method to approach them and get them interested in conservation issues. I attended special meetings of rural Pentecostal churches in Huanuco, Peru, in 2012 and 2013; the congregations allowed me to share the importance of nature conservation, and Creation Care facilitated this communication. I discuss the details of one of the events where I participated as an invited speaker to talk about nature conservation. For those who wish to foster a dialogue with Pentecostals and Evangelical residents of the Andes on the rationale for environmental stewardship, I recommend becoming familiar with the principle of Creation Care and looking for its application in specific environmental problems of the region.

INTRODUCTION

Conservationists usually preach, looking for a change in the behavior of the audience: To get people who are indifferent or hostile to nature transformed in people using nature in a sustainable and respectful way. For the conservation message to be heard and understood, it is
necessary to engage the audience. This audience, which could be rural communities, may or may not engage this message depending on their values. If the audience is religious, conservationists should not overlook their beliefs if they relate to nature.

The tropical Andes is a mega diverse region that needs urgent conservation actions. The stakeholders of the local communities are very diverse, some of them are leaders of religious communities. The Pentecostals are a notorious group that is growing very fast in the Andes; so it is necessary to engage them in conservation. A bridge to reach Pentecostals and Evangelicals to conservation is the doctrine of Creation Care. This article explains a case where Creation Care was used to engage and explain conservation awareness in Pentecostal communities in the Andes.

CASE EXAMINATION

Pentecostals in Latin America

Evangelical Christians are a distinctive segment of the population in Latin America [1]; in some areas they form closed communities or have significant political power [2–4]. To clarify, in terms of belief systems, Evangelicals in Latin America are analogous to mainline Protestant communities in the USA. In Peru, the expansion of Evangelicalism at the expense of Catholicism is well known; even though Peru is a mainly Roman Catholic country with 81.5% of its population identified as Catholic, in 2007 Evangelicals doubled from 1993 to become 12.5% of the total population [5]. Among Evangelicals in Latin America, Pentecostals and Charismatic movements are the most numerous, Peru included, especially in poor neighborhoods and rural areas [6–9]. On the expansion of Pentecostals in Latin America, H. Cox mentions: “The question of why Pentecostalism is expanding so rapidly on a continent that has been thought of as Catholic for so many centuries continues to puzzle Latin American scholars” [10].

Religious freedom was granted in Peru at the beginning of the past century; but Protestant churches and any non-Catholic religions were ignored or persecuted by pressure of the Catholic Church [11]. The first Pentecostal missionaries arrived in Peru between 1911 and 1914. They tried to establish missions in some areas of the Peruvian Andes, but faced strong opposition and retreated to the main cities [12]. Currently, there is a high diversity of Protestant denominations in Peru and Latin America, some call themselves Evangelicals or Pentecostals but do not align with any historical denominations [13]. In poor rural communities, the emphasis on afterlife and avoidance of “worldly” issues, gives their followers hope despite their misfortune; this may be why Pentecostals are thriving in the poorest places in Latin America and Africa [14]. Some Pentecostal churches claim to be “holier” than the rest of the Evangelicals and have a strongly
intolerant discourse; they even verbally attack other churches [15, 16].

Recently, Evangelical Christian theologians have entered the environmental discourse proposing that nature conservation should be part of Christian morality; this specific concept is known as the doctrine or principle of Creation Care. This doctrine explains that humans have the responsibility to care for nature because it was entrusted to them by God; the nature is God’s creation and man should be its steward. Creation Care acknowledges the current trend of ecological degradation as a sin and mobilizes churches to act as agents of restoration [17].

Thanks to this Christian view on nature, several churches and Evangelical institutions are active in environmental conservation [18]. However, there are very few significant reflections on environmentalism by Evangelical theologians in Latin America. Leonardo Boff, an ex-Roman Catholic priest from Brazil has written extensively on spirituality and Ecology [19], but his views are not rooted in the Bible and several would disagree to consider him as a source for biblical Creation Care. Available Spanish books and discourses on the topic of “creation” primarily deal with creationism and are devoted to opposing evolutionary theory, so Creation Care could be opposed because it is poorly understood [20, 21].

The Andean Pentecostals may be persuaded to view nature conservation as a moral obligation, and thus also perceive it to be a part of their Christian duty and happily embrace Creation Care. In a region known for its high biodiversity, they would then be more likely to participate in solid waste management, recycling, reforestation, logging control, regulation of wildlife hunting and the designation of specific areas for protection; viewing these activities as part of God’s plan based on biblical precedent. Because Evangelicals (mainly Pentecostals) are flourishing in the rural Andes, it is highly probable that they will be the managers of the lands that environmentalists intend to conserve. Thus, it is important to understand what they believe regarding their relationship with the land. The goals of this research were to learn about the relationship of the Evangelicals of the Peruvian Andes (which were mainly Pentecostals) with their natural environment and to test the effectiveness of the Creation Care principle in addressing environmental awareness in this context.

CONTACT WITH A PENTECOSTAL CHURCH IN THE ANDES

In July 2012, I gave a conservation workshop to Evangelical leaders in the capital city of the province of Huanuco, Peru (Figure 1); it was sponsored by the Evangelical NGO Paz y Esperanza. Twenty people from the city and rural areas attended the workshop. One of the attendants invited me to speak about nature conservation at her church, Iglesia de Dios de la Profecia [22]. It is a Pentecostal church that places strong emphasis on holiness and spiritual life, and is
doctrinally conservative. Like most Pentecostal churches, they also impose a strict moral code on their followers [9], forbidding alcohol, tobacco, divorce, and remarriage. They are not intolerant and judgmental of other Christians; they welcome non-members (such as myself) as guest speakers and do not criticize other churches.

FIGURE 1.

The author (Left) and some Evangelical leaders of Huanuco region after a conservation workshop. They have publications of the author on how to care for the environment.

The week of 4–10 August 2012 was the 32nd anniversary of Iglesia de Dios de la Profecia in the rural town of Cushipampa, Pillao, in the Peruvian Andes. Pillao is a small farming community located at a distance of two hours by car from Huanuco. It lies in the district of Chinchao, which was 31% (of 17500 of the total population) Evangelical in 2007 [5]. However, a more recent social assessment done in 2010 stated that more than 50% of this population was Evangelical [23]. This district has a large area of cloud forest recognized as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area: The Carpish Mountains [24]. The church has an important presence in the town, it has the largest church building in the area and acts as a hub for other small Pentecostal denominations (Figure 2). Other speakers on this occasion included pastors and a musical worship group from Lima. People from several towns in the region came for this anniversary event; I estimated a total of 350 people. Almost all of them were very poor peasants, mainly of Andean origin as could be expected, because as of 2004, Huanuco’s population was more poor and rural than any other Peruvian regions [25]. A few attendees came from the lowland rainforest, two hours away by car.
I later realized that many of them, may be as many as 40%, must have been illiterate as they did not bring a Bible to read in the services. In this region, Evangelicals are supposed to bring a Bible when going to a church unless they are illiterate. Other guests invited by the pastor who were not affiliated with the church included a group of teachers who manage a government institution that teaches basic literacy to adults.

FIGURE 2.
View of the Church of God of Prophesy in Cushipampa, Pillao (Huanuco).

THE PENTECOSTAL WAY OF WORSHIP AND LEARNING IN THE ANDES

The series of religious services lasted from the early morning until almost 10 PM, each of the 5 days of the anniversary, with breaks for meals. As I witnessed the services and how the speakers addressed the audience, I realized that emotions were the driving force behind worship in this church. The time for songs and worship lasted close to three hours, with everybody standing and clapping; some women and men were dancing frenetically and shaking [26]. The musical worship group used modern equipment with large loudspeakers and sang songs in the rhythms of *cumbia* and *huayno*, two forms of music very popular in this region. To keep the congregants’ attention, the guest pastors filled their speeches with vigorous shouting and calls to praise God. They exhorted the audience to become better people, to respect their families and spouses, and to look for the self-improvement necessary to achieve prosperity. They did not encourage fatalism (even though they affirmed that the end of the world is near) or preach the “prosperity
“gospel” common in some of these churches [27]. At the end of their message, they made a call to repentance (Figure 3) in which they rebuked Satan and his demons [28]. The preachers and some members spoke in tongues, sought repentance, proclaimed healing for the sick, and advocated total consecration to Jesus Christ as is typical of Pentecostal services [29]. Miraculous healing is expected to happen in Pentecostal services, some of the guests may just come looking to be healed, but never convert [30], but I did not observe this during the service.

It would be useless to ask participants to complete a written survey to get their thoughts on the environment (as I had done in the past workshop in Huanuco city); because it was expected that I should do something similar to what the other guest pastors were doing. I would only be able to glean their impressions through personal interaction after my presentation. I talked about nature conservation, which had been programmed by the pastor who was in charge as a secondary topic for forty minutes (this amount of time was small compared with the topics related to family and holiness that were addressed by the guest pastors). I had two days to prepare my talk (Appendix 1) while I was observing and attempting to understand the customs of the church members (Figure 4).
RELATIONSHIP OF THE ANDEAN PENTECOSTALS TO THE LAND

The “ecological sermon” had a very positive reception because I received favorable comments from the public. Even the pastors who heard it were quite surprised to learn the richness of Bible references that supported nature conservation. When I finished the speech, I invited interested members of the audience to approach me and talk further. During the afternoon intermission and the following morning, I spoke with some farmers (10) who gave me some insights on their relationship with the land. I learned from those informal conversations different themes that explain their relationship with nature, which I order in theological and nature management arguments:

Theological Arguments

1. “It is clear that Christians should care for the land as stewards, because the land is God's property”. This is a good perspective because they might have argued that the Bible endorses an anthropocentric view, arguing that the dominion of nature by man gives permission to use Earth's resources without limits.

2. “Nature has to be administered by man because it was created for this purpose”. This seems to contradict the first statement, and it might if there is not an adequate emphasis on stewardship. The view of nature as being created solely for man and not for God's enjoyment can be in opposition to Creation Care.
3. “In nature, everything has an order and purpose. Because it is God’s creation, chance has no place”. This is an apologetic argument, stated as a proof of God’s existence and used by many pastors and evangelists. This could be leveraged for the appreciation of ecological relationships in the sense that every species deserves conservation.

4. “Science, (biology in particular), is seen as being anti-God. It is considered odd to believe that Christians can be professionals in science.” Pastors usually only talk about science and scientists when they think that science opposes faith. Thus, references to science are typically negative. Poverty and lack of opportunities deter rural people from having a profession or a career; even sending their children to formal education means a significant effort. If any profession could be studied, they will look for the ones that give them immediate income; science is not among them.

5. “The book of Genesis, which describes the creation of nature, has to be interpreted literally”. Due to their fundamentalist belief system, anything that is seen as challenging their biblical worldview is opposed, so literalism in hermeneutics is endorsed. This is fueled by creationist propaganda, which presents evolution as a direct attack on Christian faith.

**Nature Management Arguments**

1. “The forest is valuable principally for the timber and firewood that it offers”. They were not thinking about other species that use the forest besides man. The lack of ecological knowledge is due to a lack of education in general and a focus on immediate income.

2. “A good way to manage the forests could be planting pine or eucalyptus (exotic species in the area) for timber”. The traditional way that government officers and landowners have implemented reforestation in the Andes is by planting trees that grow fast and provide lumber (Figure 5). There were no ecological criteria for reforestation.

3. “The land has a commercial value. This value depends on its productivity and the number of people living there”. They have a utilitarian notion of value. However, this view contrasts with the religious value of the land.

4. “There is a relationship between the presence of forest and ravines that provide water for crops. Where the forest was cut, there is less water in the soil”. This was an interesting observation that allowed for the opportunity of mentioning the concept of ecological services provided by forests. It also gives a practical justification for forest conservation, therefore expanding perceived value associated with forest from one solely related to timber and firewood to one that also includes preservation of water sources.

5. “Thirty years ago (in the 1980s), the government gave land to new colonizers with the directive to clear forests and plant crops”. The agrarian reform revoked several landlords’ titles and gave the land to the peasants. However, they needed to prove that the land given to them was being used. If the peasants did not cultivate the land, the title could be revoked. So the practice of logging forest for planting crops continues.
FIGURE 5.
Eucalyptus and pines replace native trees in the urban and rural areas of this part of the Andes. Native trees are scarce.

After this event, I was able to attend other meetings of Pentecostal churches in Huanuco during 2013. Their styles and emphases were the same: holiness in personal life and restoring families. I had the opportunity to interact with the church leaders and they welcomed the Creation Care principle. Even though all of them stressed that the end of times is near and that God’s judgment will bring a new era, they did not use this affirmation to avoid caring for the environment, something that can happen in other Evangelical groups [21]. They did not consider nature conservation in their preachings but in one of the meetings, one pastor that I talked to, encouraged the youth to study for professional careers and suggested that they be trained in the natural sciences.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS TO INVOLVE ANDEAN PENTECOSTALS IN CONSERVATION

Evangelical churches are very important allies in nature conservation in several places [31]. For the Pentecostals in the Andes, learning with emotions is part of their lifestyle (Figure 6), so when addressing them, this has to be taken into account. It is also important to understand that it is highly unlikely that they will welcome someone from a very different theological tradition who might be coming to teach something that they interpret as being against the Bible or their moral code. However, there are signs of tolerance in some sectors, such as approaches to Catholics.
In the Latin American context, several Pentecostal pastors, mainly in the rural areas, have neither formal theological training nor formal education [9], so having a deep and balanced discussion of academic topics with Pentecostals in rural areas is unrealistic. However, the Pentecostal clergy recognize that the training of pastors is highly important because their position conveys significant responsibility [33]. Thus, they should be willing to learn academic topics such as the principles of conservation. For many Evangelical scholars today, reason is not seen as an enemy of faith, but as an indispensable element for Christian formation [34] and even in the Pentecostal movement there are voices that call for a better comprehension of science and divine revelation without fostering conflict between them [35–37].

Even though there is no consensus among the different Evangelical traditions concerning the way to interpret the book of Genesis or offer a scientific account of origins, the Creation Care doctrine, which focuses on man as a steward of God's creation, is recognized by many Evangelicals as legitimate. I propose that this doctrine can be the bridge between Evangelicals and conservationists, an idea that has been recognized by many religion and science scholars [38–41]. Pentecostal scholars have also begun to meditate on this; affirming that caring for creation could be a way to express the proclamation of the Gospel [42]. There is also an...
affirmation expressing that the anthropocentric view of the environment should be avoided, taking into account that the healing stressed in Pentecostal discourse could be applied to the environment, and not using the eschatology of the end of days as an excuse to avoid approaching the environmental problem [43]. Recently, Swoboda's theological approach to the environment gives hope that Pentecostals are going to contribute to nature conservation [44, 45].

In Latin America, Evangelicals (Pentecostals in particular) are shaping a global culture, differently in every country, because they are gaining presence in social and political discourses [28, 46] and their strong emphasis on holiness translated to a life without corruption [47] gives them credibility. In the Andean communities of Ecuador, for example, there was a large-scale conversion, as well as this region of the Peruvian Andes, and the common consequence was the reduction of alcoholism and family violence [23, 48]. So, it is important to consider the Pentecostal's worldview in places where they have significant presence. Pentecostals place emphasis on radical changes in behavior, something that has been suggested as the imperative requisite for effective nature conservation [49]. In Chile, they run a center 9 for retreats so youth can have spiritual encounters; but they also do conservation workshops [50]. In the heart of the Peruvian Andes, an Evangelical association works with Pentecostals and other Christians to evangelize, but they also include lessons on nature conservation and tree-planting. 10 I encourage conservation practitioners to test the Creation Care principle when they need to work with churches.

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. If religious groups are influential in your study area, do you think that it is important to involve them in conservation?

2. How would you establish the first contact with a religious community in the area that you want to be conserved?

3. Would you feel comfortable attending religious services of people for whom you would also like to gain their trust?

4. Could you prepare an ecological sermon for the religious community that encourages them to engage in conservation?

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.
SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Appendix 1: Sermon on creation care applied in the Andes.

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Notes

1. This author explains the conflicts of Andean natives when converting to Protestantism in the late 1980s. Since Catholicism is a deeply ingrained part of the culture, the refusal to participate in catholic rituals caused estigmatization.

2. The Evangelical Environmental Network is an excellent reference for defining creation care, and explaining its application and philosophy. Available at www.creationcare.org.

3. This NGO is well-known for its social participation in human rights advocacy in Peru. Available at www.pazyesperanza.org.


5. This moral code and the creed with their main beliefs are stated in a pamphlet of this church.

6. Some songs by the musical group Nueva Filadelfia, that was performing there, are posted on YouTube, i.e., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0uEeUVue_0.

7. Casting out demons that cause poverty, corruption, or almost any problem in life is common among Pentecostals and charismatics in Latin America.

8. Yong explains his theology in a way to be compatible with the scientific worldview. He states that the book of Genesis does not provide details on scientific origins but only the intent of the Creator.


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