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# Challenges Facing the Religious Community in Addressing Global Climate Change

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## **Challenges Facing the Religious Community in Addressing Global Climate Change**

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There are several key influences at play in the relationship between religion and a concern for nature and the environment, particularly as it relates to an issue like global climate change. These trends directly affect the ability of religion to influence public ideas, public policy, and political will. These situations and trends are particularly applicable to the situation in the United States.

### **The Scientific Understanding of Climate Change and the Role of Religion**

The relationship between the scientific understanding of climate change and the ensuing role of religion is critical to creating the moral and political will to address climate change. Getting this correct is almost a first among equals. Science has to first document and verify what climate change means, particularly the human impact on climate change. It is religion's role to reflect on these realities and provide a larger frame of meaning and moral vision to help society develop the moral and political will to address the concerns science raises. Religion has to lift up the larger issues of the place of the human person in nature and grapple with what are the fundamental moral responsibilities and the ethics of climate change. But, religion is dependent upon science for accurate documentation. Because faith communities depend on the basic soundness of the science of climate change, efforts to disavow this soundness hamper the leadership and education efforts of these communities to move their members to engage the issue.

Climate change is a controversial public policy issue, and organized efforts to undercut its underlying science originate from those who, for a range of reasons, deny its existence. Research conducted at the University of Michigan on the views of climate change deniers suggests that they see climate change and the regulatory solutions posed as an attack on the American way of life—overregulation, international controls, impingement on market freedoms, etc.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between views on climate change and on environmental policy and regulation are closely linked and can provide insight into the views of both members of the faith community and the general public.

Generally, members of faith communities track the beliefs about environmental policy shared by the general public. According to the 2010 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey by the Pew

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hoffman, "Talking Past Each Other? Cultural Framing of Skeptical and Convinced Logics in the Climate Change Debate," *Ross School of Business Working Paper*, February 2011, [http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/83161/4/1154\\_Ahoffman\\_finalFeb11.pdf](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/83161/4/1154_Ahoffman_finalFeb11.pdf)

Research Center: “Religion has far less influence on opinions about environmental policy than other factors do. Just 6% say that their religious beliefs have had the biggest influence on what they think about tougher environmental rules.”<sup>2</sup> The affirmation that religion has little impact on one’s views on climate change leaves us to examine the role of science in greater detail.

Within U.S. society, there appears to be a serious lack of understanding of science in general and the scientific method in particular. The Pew Research Center found that 85% of scientists polled identify limited public knowledge about science as a major problem.<sup>3</sup> What may be happening is that the public does not understand sufficiently the scientific process—e.g., scientific theory is interpreted as “we got a hunch” rather than as a systematic conclusion to research. Thus, your theory is as good as mine. A large public education effort is needed to help the public understand that the science of climate change is not up for grabs. The research cited in the press is most often the cutting edge of scientific work—work that is incomplete. This opens up the public discussion to the idea that climate science is rife with “controversy.” Pew also found that a large number of scientists feel that the media has done a poor job of educating the public. Specifically, scientists feel that the public has an unrealistic understanding of the time scientific discovery takes.<sup>4</sup>

People of faith are not necessarily anymore scientifically literate or illiterate or more focused on the details of an issue like climate change than the general public. The Public Religion Research Institute, for instance, found that support for stricter environmental laws and regulations generally mirrors the general population among white evangelicals and Catholics.<sup>5</sup> While the religious organizations that represent major faith communities in the United States and that make up the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Environmental Network, the National Council of Churches, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life) are convinced of the science of climate change, there are some elements in faith communities who either deny the reality of climate change or doubt that human agency is a cause. The differences between the general public and faith communities on these issues are shown in greater detail in Figure 1.<sup>6</sup> In addition, going back to the relationship between climate change and regulation, it is my belief that some

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views,” *Pew Research Center*, September 2010, [http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics\\_and\\_Elections/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf](http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics_and_Elections/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media,” *News Release*, July 9, 2009, <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/528.pdf>

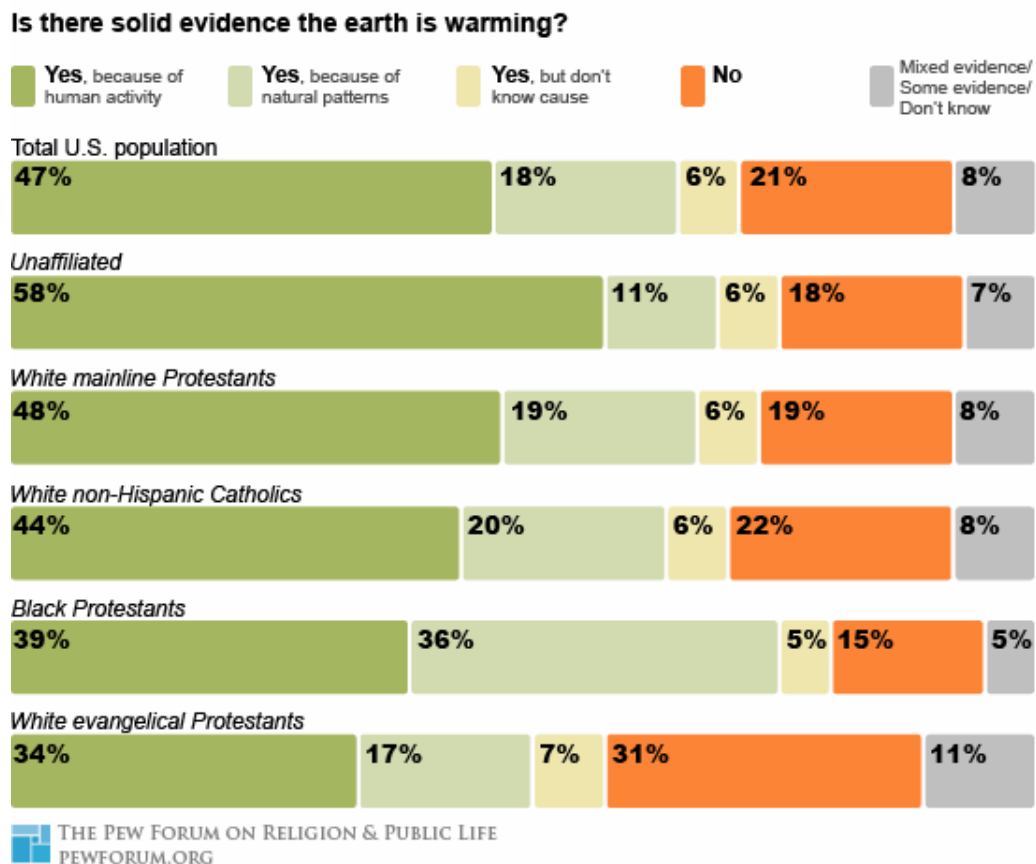
<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media,” *News Release*, July 9, 2009, <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/528.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, “Poll – Climate Change and Global Poverty,” [www.publicreligion.org](http://www.publicreligion.org), March 2009, <http://www.publicreligion.org/research/published/?id=198>

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religious Groups’ View on Global Warming,” *Pew Research Center*, April 2009, <http://pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/Religious-Groups-Views-on-Global-Warming.aspx>

religious leaders may not deny climate change or human agency but are nonetheless reluctant to rely on measures outside of the market as solutions.

Figure 1.



The “debate” about the science of climate change—as to whether it is happening or not—has more to do with an orchestrated campaign to disavow the scientific findings of the vast majority of the scientific community than it does with a genuine debate within the scientific community. This disinformation campaign affects the views of the general public, as well as people of faith, creating doubts in the minds of some. People of faith just like the general public rely upon the media for much of their information. Pew found that what people hear or read in the media is one of the strongest influences on opinions about environmental regulations.<sup>7</sup> This is not so much about how much more science has to prove, as it is about the need for the scientific community to improve the communications of its findings and work in a way that the public can understand.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views,” *Pew Research Center*, September 2010, [http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics\\_and\\_Elections/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf](http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics_and_Elections/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf)

NRPE and its member groups are fully committed to educating the public about the religious and moral implications of climate change. But, our work would be easier without the distraction of the “effort by climate deniers.” Fortunately, we do have a key moral principle to guide us. Prudence is an ancient personal and political virtue. In their 2001 statement, “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good,” the U.S. Catholic Bishops state:

“The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. This virtue is not only a necessary one for individuals in leading morally good lives, but is also vital to the moral health of the larger community...Prudence not only helps us to identify the principles at stake in a given issue, but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. Prudence is not, as popularly thought, simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions.

In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. Scientific levels of scientific consensus—even in a situation with less than full certainty, where the consequences of not acting are serious—justifies, indeed can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential disasters. In other words, if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind’s well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.”

While the disinformation campaign affects the work of convincing the public and people of faith of the seriousness of the climate issue, there is reason for hope. This hope lies in exercising the virtue of prudence, that even without full certainty we know enough to take action. This is in effect what the major religious communities that make up the National Religious Partnership for the Environment are doing. It is also a sign of hope that younger members of faith communities are much more likely to see the issue of global climate change as a serious issue and one that requires action.

### **Handling a Plethora of Moral Issues**

The ability of religion to effect the public’s moral understanding of issues like climate change is in turn influenced by (1) the larger debate about the role of religion in the public square; (2) the fact that in Catholic and Evangelical communities, some issues are considered front-line moral issues and others are given less moral weight; and (3) the plethora of issues addressed by the faith community. The debate about the role of religion in society and its role in shaping public policy is as old as the Republic, and it rightfully continues today. When it comes to issues like climate change, religion has to stake out its unique role as a moral arbiter while not being

perceived as partisan. Given the political firestorm surrounding climate change, this is not an easy role to play.

While not easy, the faith community has begun to stake out a decisive role in policy debates. In the recent round of legislative debates about climate change in the 111th Congress, faith communities chose to focus their attention on the issue of poverty and climate change. While some members of NRPE developed overall policy stances on energy and climate policy, all of the member groups chose to work collectively on poverty-related concerns. This choice was rooted in Scripture's command to care for the poor and in our member groups' and religious communities' extensive outreach to those living in poverty and their experience providing relief and development programs in over a hundred countries. Being rooted in local communities that are already facing the impacts of climate change gives faith communities significant credibility in policy circles. Plus, when the faith community goes to Capitol Hill to discuss poverty and climate change, no one asks why—they understand right away the moral dimension of this stance. These communities' practical experiences add to their credibility in helping policy makers understand the reality of the impact of climate change on poor people.

Members of the Partnership led the effort during the climate legislative debates of 2007-2010 to address the needs of the poorest developing nations in adapting to climate change. Faith communities in general saw this as a moral obligation. The poor have done the least to cause this problem but bear a disproportionate burden of impact. Collectively, these members helped to draft language that was placed into the climate legislation sponsored by Senators Lieberman and Warner in 2007. This language (further refined by colleagues in the wider relief and development community) became the prototype for the Waxman/Markey climate bill that passed the House in 2009. This language was also included in Senator Boxer and Senator Kerry's climate legislation. The Senate, however, never passed this bill.

The Catholic and Evangelical communities have a set of issues that are considered to have a primary moral status. Abortion, euthanasia, protection of the family, etc. receive the primary focus and emphasis. This does not mean that other issues like climate change are not important, but rather that they do not have the same salience, institutional support, or equivalent support among the faithful in the pews. This does not mean that these two communities do not address climate change because in fact they have extensive programs and education and organizing efforts underway. It just means that an issue like climate change is not front and center, making it more challenging to educate and garner support.

Faith communities address a plethora of other issues facing society. In addition to the life issues cited above, health care, immigration, poverty, war and peace issues, etc., can compete for resources and energy. This diversity of issues calls for a strategy of integration. It is necessary to address the health and poverty aspects of climate change and other environmental issues as a

way of building the leadership capacity of faith communities and their abilities to educate and mobilize people in the pews about climate change.

While faith communities necessarily have broad policy agendas, they are also adept at handling a wide range of issues. The Catholic community, e.g., has a long history of tackling difficult issues like the ethics of war and peace, economic justice and immigration. In a similar manner, it established in 1993 a program, still in existence, devoted to addressing environmental issues. In 2006, it established in cooperation with the Secretariat of the NRPE, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, whose mission is to help Catholic parishes and organizations address environmental issues. CCCC has organized major Catholic institutions and organizations like the Catholic Health Association, Catholic Charities USA, and others to begin to address climate change. Similar programs exist within the Evangelical community and with each of the member groups of NRPE.

### **The Complexity of Climate Change Policy Issues and the Moral Response**

Climate change is a complicated scientific, economic, political and moral policy issue. Addressing climate change requires that a credible scientific process determine the appropriate levels of gas emissions that would allow for the stabilization of the atmosphere. It requires policy makers, in light of the science, to craft a policy of sustainable energy development to meet future needs. It requires diplomats to negotiate a fair and equitable international set of agreements to meet the scientific targets and to fulfill the responsibilities of both developed and developing nations in securing a just outcome. Developing nations have a right to overcome poverty but will need substantial aid to do this in a way that does no further environmental damage. We know from the climate debate that all of these issues are contentious, in play, and nowhere near resolution.

Despite this complexity and while science continues to document the extent and severity of climate change, major religious communities, like the member groups of NRPE, as well as religious leaders (Pope Benedict XVI, Patriarch Bartholomew, e.g.,) have spoken out about the moral urgency of addressing climate change. As cited earlier, all of these groups and religious leaders explicitly call for action to address global climate change even if we do not know everything.

While the faith community shares a broad religious message of caring for God's creation and generally being responsible for stewardship, they have varying capacities to influence the details of policy. It is not easy to craft moral arguments that can sway large numbers of people around complex issues, programs, and details of gas emissions, mandatory carbon taxes vs. cap and

trade, etc. The more complex the issues, programs, and policy details, the more complicated the moral analysis and thus the more that people of good will can disagree.

However, this does not mean that faith communities should shy away from these moral complexities. Rather, they can and do develop and apply moral principles to complex issues all the time. In their 1991 statement, “Renewing the Earth,” and in their 2001 statement on global climate change, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, while not laying out specific policy prescriptions, lays out a series of principles that should govern how we think about God’s creation and urges people to action, even in situations where information is incomplete. The Catholic bishops have no specific policy stance regarding endangered species, but they do urge a care and concern for other creatures precisely because they are other creatures created by God. These principles give people room to craft suitable policies but not the option of doing nothing. Each of the member groups of the Partnership also provides substantive moral guidance on policy issues, some with greater detail and specificity than others.

Climate change is still a relatively new issue for faith communities. Questions like abortion, poverty, war and peace, etc. have been on their plates for years. Perhaps, because of the “newness” of this issue, an equivalent to the just war theory that guides war and peace debates has not emerged. While it may or may not be possible to craft such an equivalent ethic, faith communities need to continue to work on a set of principles that both the broader faith community and the larger society can see as needed and applicable to environmental issues, like climate change. While much of the public debate about climate change is couched in economic and political arguments, these arguments are based on deeper ethical notions whether they are stated as such or not. If these arguments could be “decoded” and translated into a “moral vision” that would underlie economic and political stances, it may offer a new paradigm for public discussion.

As cited previously, one area of common agreement among faith communities and one where they can have some impact is the link between poverty and climate change. Like many issues facing society, people who live in poverty face the potential for *disproportionate* impacts from climate change. The World Bank, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and others have documented well the growing negative impacts on poorer nations requiring substantial funding and programs for adaptation in addition to mitigation and energy resourcing.<sup>8</sup> The security fallout from climate impacts is also becoming increasingly clearer. Because Scripture is clear on our responsibilities for the “least among us,” faith communities have a clear role in focusing on the justice dimensions of climate change.

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<sup>8</sup>Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Climate Change 2007”; UNDP 2007, *Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world, 2007/2008*, Human Development Report. United Nations Development Program. Palgrave Macmillan. New York. NY; World Bank Report 2010: *Development and Climate Change*



## **The Global Faith Community and Climate Change**

While the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and Evangelical organizations help to bring messages and resources to an issue like climate change, practical interfaith and ecumenical policy and program coordination does not exist at higher judicatory levels at the international level. Some organizations like the World Council of Churches have been involved for many years. Some are newer actors. But, without adequate coordination, this makes it more challenging to have an impact at forums where international negotiations take place. As far as I can determine, there is no other organization like the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in any other country. At recent forums like Copenhagen, Cancun, and, I presume, upcoming Durban climate talks, there is some limited sharing of information and policy efforts by faith communities, but it still has a long way to go to have a greater impact. The work that the Partnership was able to do on Capitol Hill to promote a policy to address the international adaptation needs of developing countries is a case in point.

Outside of faith communities, other issues need to be navigated. First, there are other major actors in the climate debate. These include the scientific, environmental, security, business, and other NGO communities. In addition, there are governments and international regimes. The faith community is not allied with any of these communities nor should it be. However, each of them desires close support and a blessing, if you will, from the faith communities. For faith communities to maintain their integrity and influence, they need to work closely with each of these other actors while maintaining their independent voices and ways of working. At a practical level, this means being present at various forums with other interested stakeholders while maintaining independence in communications and meetings with key policy makers.

The climate debates are, to date, primarily dominated by science, economics, and politics. The moral dimension of the public debate is growing, but it is still not front and center. As noted previously, stakeholders promote various views or solutions to climate change without ever articulating their moral visions or moral assumptions of the policy proposals they espouse. Thus, the issue seems on the surface to be about economics or politics but in reality it is often a clash of unarticulated values. The lack of a common set of moral principles makes it more difficult to help people see the moral urgency of addressing this issue. We have not yet reached the moral tipping point. An apt analogy would be to the civil rights movement. At some point, Americans got the message—that it is immoral to legally foster racism and racial segregation—and a moral tipping point was reached that enabled the nation to back new legal protections that outlawed overt racial segregation.

The way forward at this time is for faith communities to expand their efforts at helping local communities in congregations, parishes, and temples to engage environmental issues. This requires long-term educational and organizing efforts, and resources. The national organizations

that make up the Partnership are well positioned for this task. At the same time, faith communities should continue to foster discourse that reflects on the moral dimensions of these issues and to offer policy guidance to their members.

### **About the Author**

Walter E. Grazer provides policy analysis and organizational development support services to organizations specializing in the role of religion in public policy with an emphasis on the issues of the environment, religious freedom, and human rights. He currently serves as Special Advisor to the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Formerly, he served as Director of the Environmental Justice Program and Senior Policy Advisor for Religious Liberty, Human Rights and European Affairs for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. At the Conference, he also served as Deputy Director for Migration and Refugee Services and Policy Advisor for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Development. He is author of *Catholics Going Green*, published by Ave Maria Press in May 2009, and is also co-editor with Rev. Drew Christiansen, S.J. of *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*. Mr. Grazer holds a M.A. in International Relations, a M.S.W. in Social Work and a B.A. degree in Philosophy.