Is Religion Relevant for Climate Change?

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Islam and forecasting the rains

Semi-arid Sudan
Islamic culture
Climate prediction
‘Blind to religion’

“All we need is the will to change, which we trust will be motivated by knowledge and an understanding of the science of climate change”

[R K Pachauri, 2 November 2014]
Mythos, logos and narrative

“The emphasis on [science], consumption, economics and policy usually fails to engage people at any deep level because it does not address the narrative, the mythological, the metaphorical ... The faiths are the holders of these areas and without them, policies will have very few real roots ...”
Different religious globalisms

• Neoliberal religious globalisms
• Religious justice globalisms
• Neotraditional religious globalisms

Dr Erin Wilson
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Diverse responses

Ash Wednesday Declaration - 12 Feb 2012
1934 Barmen Declaration -- “Operation Noah believes climate change is just such an issue”

Protect the Poor: Ten Reasons to Oppose Harmful Climate Change Policies – “We call on political leaders to abandon fruitless and harmful policies to control global temperature”
Religious diversity

• There is immense variability in the phenomenon of “religion”

• So talk about particular religions in particular contexts – e.g. North American Buddhists or South Pacific Christians ... cf. Bhutanese Buddhists or Canadian Christians

• Nevertheless, some religions elicit global-scale responses – e.g. Papal encyclicals; the *hajj* - as well as private and personal ones
Why religion is relevant for climate change

... influences believers’ cosmologies, beliefs and values

... mobilises broad audiences and movements

... possesses significant institutional and economic resources

... cultivates social capital – networks, communities, etc. – which can engender change
Modern cosmologies

(from Earth System Science: An Overview, NASA, 1988)
Traditional cosmologies
Some different worldviews

Traditional
• Animist, Neo-Pagan (deep ecology)

Theistic
• Polytheistic
• Monotheistic
• Non-theistic

Materialist
• Secular humanism
• Evolutionary destiny
“From ancient mythology to indigenous belief systems to modern organized religions, weather phenomena are believed to be explicitly controlled by the sky-dwelling gods”
Why is climate changing?

“When I asked a man in Majuro if he believed in climate change [English term] he replied ...

'I think it may be true. Because I see that the *mejatoto* is not very good nowadays. Life is harder. Goods are expensive. The sun is stronger. And there are improper relations between kin.’

I then asked him why the *mejatoto* was changing, and he answered ... ‘Maybe because life is harder nowadays and things of that sort.’

Thus a whole slew of perturbations—cosmic, meteorological, geological, oceanic, temporal, moral, cultural, economic—varying from the cost of living to violation of kinship taboos, counted as evidence in favour of the scientific assertion of climate change.”

Peter Rudiak-Gould (2011)
The severe flooding in England in June and July 2007 was a ‘strong and definite judgement from God ... we are reaping the consequences of our moral degeneration ... in which every type of lifestyle is now regarded as legitimate ... and where economic structures are built on greed. We are in a situation where we are liable for God’s judgement which is intended to call us to repentance.’

Anglican Bishop of Carlisle, Graham Dow, Quoted in Sunday Telegraph newspaper, 2 July 2007
Why is climate changing?

‘Global warming is the Earth’s judgement on the global market empire and on the heedless consumption it fosters ... accounts of the global warming crisis that refuse the fundamental conflict between the imperial global economy and the health of the biosphere ... cannot do justice to the real roots of the problem.’


‘If we fail to take care of the Earth, it surely will take care of itself by making us no longer welcome. Those with faith should look again at our Earthly home and see it as a holy place, part of God’s creation, but something that we have desecrated.’

Worldviews and agency

Different worldviews = different views of human and divine agency

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Human agency matters</th>
<th>Human agency doesn’t count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Divine agency</td>
<td>Religious optimists</td>
<td>Religious fatalists</td>
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<tr>
<td>No divine agency</td>
<td>Liberal progressives</td>
<td>Fatalists, hedonists</td>
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The PRRI/AAR Survey – concern by religious affiliation

Climate Change Concern Index by Religious Affiliation

- **Very concerned**: 29%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 43%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 22%
- **Very unconcerned**: 6%

**All Americans**

- **Very concerned**: 29%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 21%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 29%
- **Very unconcerned**: 21%

**Hispanic Catholic**

- **Very concerned**: 30%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 21%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 6%
- **Very unconcerned**: 8%

**Unaffiliated**

- **Very concerned**: 34%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 26%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 14%
- **Very unconcerned**: 12%

**Black Protestant**

- **Very concerned**: 37%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 25%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 17%
- **Very unconcerned**: 10%

**Non-Christian Religion**

- **Very concerned**: 35%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 35%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 9%
- **Very unconcerned**: 6%

**Jewish**

- **Very concerned**: 27%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 26%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 13%
- **Very unconcerned**: 13%

**White Mainline Protestant**

- **Very concerned**: 22%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 21%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 31%
- **Very unconcerned**: 26%

**White Evangelical Protestant**

- **Very concerned**: 34%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 32%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 30%
- **Very unconcerned**: 28%

**White Catholic**

- **Very concerned**: 18%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 17%
- **Somewhat unconcerned**: 32%
- **Very unconcerned**: 28%

Source: PRRI/AAR, Religion, Values, and Climate Change Survey, November 2014
Religion and climate change

• But religion is not just about worldviews and beliefs – cf. the Enlightenment bias toward reason

• Importantly, religious faith also about institutions, meaning-making rituals, cultural imaginaries, moral commitments and individual behaviours
How religions have responded ...
The Evangelical Climate Initiative

“Houghton led the IPCC’s Scientific Assessment Working Group from 1988 to 2002. He embodies the marriage of devout evangelicalism and expert science and has been the key scientific messenger to American evangelical leaders”

The Evangelical Climate Initiative

Three theological tenets:

Creation Care

Neighbour Care

Eschatology
Different paradigms of stewardship

- Preservationist
- Conservationist
- Developmental
Papal Encyclical - Laudato Si’

In many ways is transcends these categories:

• About the needs of the poor and the Janus face of technology
• A vision of human dignity and purpose
• The ecological crisis is a summons to an interior conversion
Religion and behaviours -- virtue traditions
Religion and behaviours -- adaptation

• Rainwater harvesting in Kiribas
• Disaster recovery in Solomons
• Climate advocacy in Canadian North
• How religious institutions and values affect mitigation & adaptation
Is religion relevant for climate change?

“Humanity’s ecological relations have religious and cultural dimensions. Failure to recognize and interpret those dimensions impoverishes environmental understanding, whereas engaging them has the potential to connect environmental questions with fundamental human questions of meaning, value, and purpose”

Willis Jenkins, University of Virginia, 2016
What sort of a problem is climate change?

Ditch the 2°C warming goal

Does GDP Growth Improve Our Well-being?
‘The world we want’?

“Gathering priorities of people from every corner of the world, this project will build a collective vision that will be used directly by the UN and World Leaders to plan a new development agenda launching in 2015, one that is based on the aspirations of all citizens!”
Is religion relevant for climate change?

Yes – religions influence interpretations of climate change: causes, moral culpabilities, responses

Yes – religious identity influences climate politics and (in)activism

Yes – religious institutions mobilise and constrain actions in different ways

... “because environmental issues are entangled with human ways of being in the world, they are [necessarily] entangled with religion. [And] insofar as religion is involved in how people inhabit and interpret their world, it is involved in ecologies”

Willis Jenkins
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