

Religion to the Rescue (?) in an Age of Climate Disruption

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Since the early 1990s calls to address the negative consequences of anthropogenic climate change have been increasing by religious elites as well as by scholars who affiliate with and study religions. An important example of the trend occurred in November 2014 during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego where ‘Religion and Climate Change’ was the conference’s central theme. Data presented at this meeting, however, was not encouraging for those hoping that religious individuals were embracing consensus scientific understandings about anthropogenic climate change, and becoming deeply concerned about climate disruption and making a strong response to it a high priority. The scientific study of the religious dimensions of perceptions and actions related to climate change, for its part, is showing signs of becoming more rigorous and illuminating, better able to track changes that might unfold with regard to religious perceptions and practices related to the earth’s environmental systems.

Keywords

Religion, Climate Change, Climate Disruption, Ecology, Greening of Religion, Environmental Attitudes, Environmental Behavior, The Story of Noah and Ecology, American Academy of Religion, Forum on Religion and Ecology, Public Religion Research Institute

Like many others, my worries about anthropogenic climate change began in 1989 when I read Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (McKibben 1989). Newly arrived at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, I gave the Earth Day talk there in April 1990 urging dramatic action in response. It was clear then that if the emerging science proved prescient, such action would be needed. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a long series of increasingly well-supported and alarming reports, this need became all the more evident. As a scholar who has been trying to understand whether what people construe as 'religion' might contribute to environmental mobilization, I wondered if, in the case of climate change, religion would hinder such mobilization. Or on the other hand, might religion come to the rescue?

During the 1980s I was studying liberation movements in Latin America and elsewhere. It was clear that, in the conflicts they were engaged in, religion both supported and subverted the prevailing social order. In 1989, continuing this interest in religion and politics, I began what became long-term research on radical environment movements. I quickly discovered that although there are many tributaries to such movements, 'religion' had played a number of roles within them, including inspiring action, creating community, and buttressing courage among movement participants.¹ It had also become clear that ideas expressed and promoted by intellectuals, especially the most charismatic among them, played important if not also decisive roles in precipitating and spreading these movements (Taylor 2005a, 2002, 1995a, 1995b, 1991).

So it was with great interest fueled by simple fascination, as well as ethical concern about the negative social and ecological consequences of climate disruption, that I became interested in efforts to understand and promote environmental concern among the world's differently religious peoples. I set out to understand from both historical and social scientific perspectives whether and if so under what sorts of circumstances religions might contribute to or hinder environmental action. Like many others, I took seriously historian Lynn White Jr.'s assertion that the anthropocentric ideas prevalent in Christianity (and by extension in all Abrahamic religions), hinder environmental concern and action, as well as his claim that because 'the roots of our [environment-related] trouble[s] are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not' (White 1967: 1207).

One important early effort along these lines was undertaken under the umbrella of the American Academy of Religion, which in 1990 approved an application to create a 'religion and ecology' focus that has continued since its inception during the organization's 1991 convention (Taylor 2005b). Initiatives with similar premises occurred in other venues, as when a 'Spirit and Nature' conference held at Vermont's Middlebury College in 1990 and orchestrated by Steven C. Rockefeller was then turned into an American Public Television documentary produced by the well-known journalist Bill Moyers, and a book soon followed (Moyers 1991, Rockefeller and Elder 1992). A similar, long-term initiative led by two religion professors, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, began in the mid-1990s with their ten 'Religions of the World and Ecology' conferences at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. The gatherings took place between 1996 and 1998 and led to the publication of a corresponding book series (Tucker and Williams 1997, Hessel and Ruether 2000, Tucker and Berthrong 1998, Girardot, Miller, and Liu 2001, Chapple 2000, Grim 2001, Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003,

¹ When founding this journal I encouraged contributors to wrestle with and define the key words in the journal's title in the ways they found most analytically useful. With regard to 'religion', contributors can define and deploy the term variously; we do not enforce any particular definitional boundary (Taylor 2007). This approach is known as the 'family resemblance' school of religion analysis (Saler 1993).

Chapple 2002, Tirosch-Samuels 2002). In 1998, Tucker and Grim also founded the Forum on Religion and Ecology to complement and extend their approach and mission. They explained that there are ‘three methodological approaches’ in the emerging religion and ecology field, ‘retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction’ (Tucker and Grim 2001: 16), and the basic premise and objective have been to get the religious ideas right so they will promote environmentally responsible behavior. As Tucker concluded in another work, ‘The capacity of the world’s religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a resilient community of life is significant. Indeed it may prove indispensable’ (Tucker 2014: 20). Many other scholars have also championed the potential and progress of religious environmentalism, most notably Gottlieb (2007) and Sponsel (2014, 2012), as have many articles in newspapers and blogs.²

Until the AAR’s annual meeting in November 2014, however, only scant scholarly attention had been focused on religion and climate change (Haluzi-DeLay 2014).³ At this meeting Laurie Zoloth, as was her prerogative at the President of the organization that year, established religion and climate change as the focus of the meeting. All program units were encouraged to devote sessions to the issue and many of them did. She also arranged for scientific experts to address the members in large, plenary sessions. And in her own Presidential address she confessed that despite her expertise as a Jewish bioethicist, she had only recently come to consider climate disruption the gravest threat facing the human community. She then drew deeply on her own Jewish prophetic tradition as she delivered a clarion call for religion scholars to disrupt their personal and professional lives to take up the challenge. Her premise was similar to much of the energy behind the religion and ecology initiative begun nearly 25 years earlier – that religious ideas were important if not decisive drivers of human behavior – and good religious values, updated with contemporary scientific understandings, were needed to inspire salutary behavioral change. But her own presentation – and much else going on at the conference and beyond it – suggested that arriving at and effectively deploying such values would be difficult.

This was apparent from the outset of Zoloth’s keynote lecture, which she began by projecting passages from two versions of the Noah story on the large conference screens – one from the Hebrew Bible and a second from the Qur’an – asking those present, as one might in a classroom or religious service, to turn to one another and discuss these passages. Left unexplained was how these passages were related to her climate change focus. I was aware, of course, how some practitioners of Abrahamic traditions interpret the Noah story as an environmental fable, as did the director Darren Aronofsky in his cinematic version, *Noah* (2014). Some Evangelical Christians even used such an interpretation to defend the Endangered Species Act in the halls of the U.S. Congress in the mid-1990s (Kearns 1997). Their argument was, essentially, that because God insisted that Noah save all animal species by building an arc large enough for them, God’s people today should exercise a similar concern. To interpret the film in this way, of course, cherry picks the story by leaving out the horror of it: an angry and jealous

² The Forum on Religion and Ecology has an online venue where it provides a list of books and articles, most of which are from news media, focusing on religion and climate change: <http://fore.research.yale.edu/climate-change/articles-on-religion-and-climate-change/>. Also available via a link there is a link to statements of environmental concern from many religious organizations

³ Haluzi DeLay’s review of the literature shows that some religious individuals and groups have made statements about climate change and some religious groups are responding to help people negatively affected by it, but his literature review does not evidence a groundswell of understanding and response to climate disruption, while noting how little research into religion and climate change there has been, especially in non-Western contexts.

God killed countless innocents because of his wrath toward a single species, and then sparing one human family from that most problematic of all species, this god immediately re-instituted human dominion over all the other ones. Moreover, this god was apparently indifferent to plant life, for no space for a greenhouse or seed bank was provided to ensure the survival of such species. To any neutral observer possessed of ordinary logic and ethical sentiments, this narrative is no environmental fable but an ethical and ecological horror story. Nevertheless, Zoloth suggested, drawing on another aspect of her tradition, scholars should take every seventh year off from holding their annual meetings, an *environmental* Sabbath year. Her objective with this prophetic call was to reduce carbon emissions and contributions to climate change, as well as provide a moral example for similar actions by other individuals and groups. It was also interesting to me that Zoloth's declaration was rooted foremost in concerns for justice among human beings, which was based in turn on her perception that poor and marginalized humans were already, and would bear in the future, the brunt of climate disruption. But despite her starting point with the Noah story, non-human organisms were, at most, in the background during the rest of her impassioned speech.

As interesting as Zoloth's challenge to her colleagues was, the most interesting session I attended presented survey research led by Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute. Titled 'Believers, Sympathizers, & Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy and Science' (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014), the study did not provide much room for optimism that religious individuals and groups in the United States were dramatically gearing up to take on the challenge. In this it cohered with earlier, qualitative research on religion and climate change around the world (Veldman, Szasz, and Haluza-Delay 2014). But the methodologically sophisticated PRRI study added valuable quantitative data, as the research was based on a random probability sample of over three thousand respondents nationwide who were interviewed by telephone. This made it possible to illuminate the beliefs and attitudes of the largest religious groups in the United States as well as some smaller populations and sub-groups, such as American Jews and Christians of different traditions and ethnicities. I strongly encourage those interested to read the study for themselves.⁴ I will, however, mention a few of the findings that I thought were particularly interesting.

Benchmark questions to determine whether respondents' views about climate change found that only 46% of Americans agreed with the scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic biosphere warming (although another 24% thought the world was warming but not because of human activities).⁵ Only among Jews, Hispanic Catholics, and those who did not express a religious affiliation did a majority concur with the consensus scientific view at 66%, 61%, and 57%, respectively. And only 50% of all Americans were concerned about climate change, whatever they thought about its origins (Figures 1-3).⁶

⁴ Online: <http://ow.ly/GTmqG>.

⁵ For the most important recent expression of this consensus see *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability, the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, at <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>. For scientific organizations that have endorsed the consensus, see NASA's list at <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/> — the union of concerned scientists' at http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science_and_impacts/science/scientific-consensus-on.html and the website of skeptical science at <http://www.skepticalscience.com/global-warming-scientific-consensus-intermediate.htm>.

⁶ The first two figures, which focus on perceptions of climate change by religious affiliation, ethnicity, and region (respectively) did not appear in the original report but were provided Robby Jones and Dan Cox of the PRRI. The

Figure 1

04 - Religion

Generated: November 7, 2014

Q7/Q8 Combined

	All Americans	Religious Affiliation							Catholics	
	All Americans (A)	White Evangelical (B)	White Mainline (C)	Black Protestant (D)	Catholic (E)	Jewish (F)	Other Non-Christian Religion (G)	Unaffiliated (H)	White Catholic (I)	Hispanic Catholic (J)
Unweighted Sample Size	3,022	602	437	245	584	135	107	573	389	134
Earth warming, caused by humans Column %	46%	27%	44% B	50% B	49% B	66% BCDEG	50% B	57% BCDE	40%	61% I
Earth warming, caused by natural patterns Column %	20%	24% CEFH	19% F	28% CEFH	19% F	9%	21% F	17%	19%	22%
Earth warming, not sure causes Column %	4%	5%	5%	4%	4%	6%	5%	3%	5% J	1%
Earth not warming Column %	26%	39% CDEFGH	29% DFH	16%	26% DH	16%	20%	20%	34% J	15%
Not sure Earth is warming Column %	3%	5% DEH	3%	2%	2%	2%	4%	2%	2%	1%

Figure 2

02 - Race and Region

Generated: November 7, 2014

Q7/Q8 Combined

	All Americans	Race/Ethnicity			Census Regions			
	All Americans (A)	White, non-Hispanic (B)	black, non-Hispanic (C)	Hispanic (D)	Northeast (E)	Midwest (F)	South (G)	West (H)
Unweighted Sample Size	3,022	2,071	324	316	557	671	1,119	675
Earth warming, caused by humans Column %	46%	42%	50% B	58% BC	54% FG	38%	43% F	52% FG
Earth warming, caused by natural patterns Column %	20%	20%	27% BD	20%	15%	22% E	21% E	22% E
Earth warming, not sure causes Column %	4%	5% D	4%	2%	5%	3%	5% F	4%
Earth not warming Column %	26%	30% CD	17%	18%	25% H	36% EGH	27% H	18%
Not sure Earth is warming Column %	3%	4%	3%	2%	2%	2%	4% EF	4%

Religious people who had heard sermons expressing concerns about climate change, however, were modestly more likely to have such concerns than those who had not (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014: 4). This suggested that religious authorities could exercise at least

third figure, ‘Climate Change Concern Index by Religious Affiliation’ appeared in the report on page 15. I am grateful for their permission to reproduce them here.

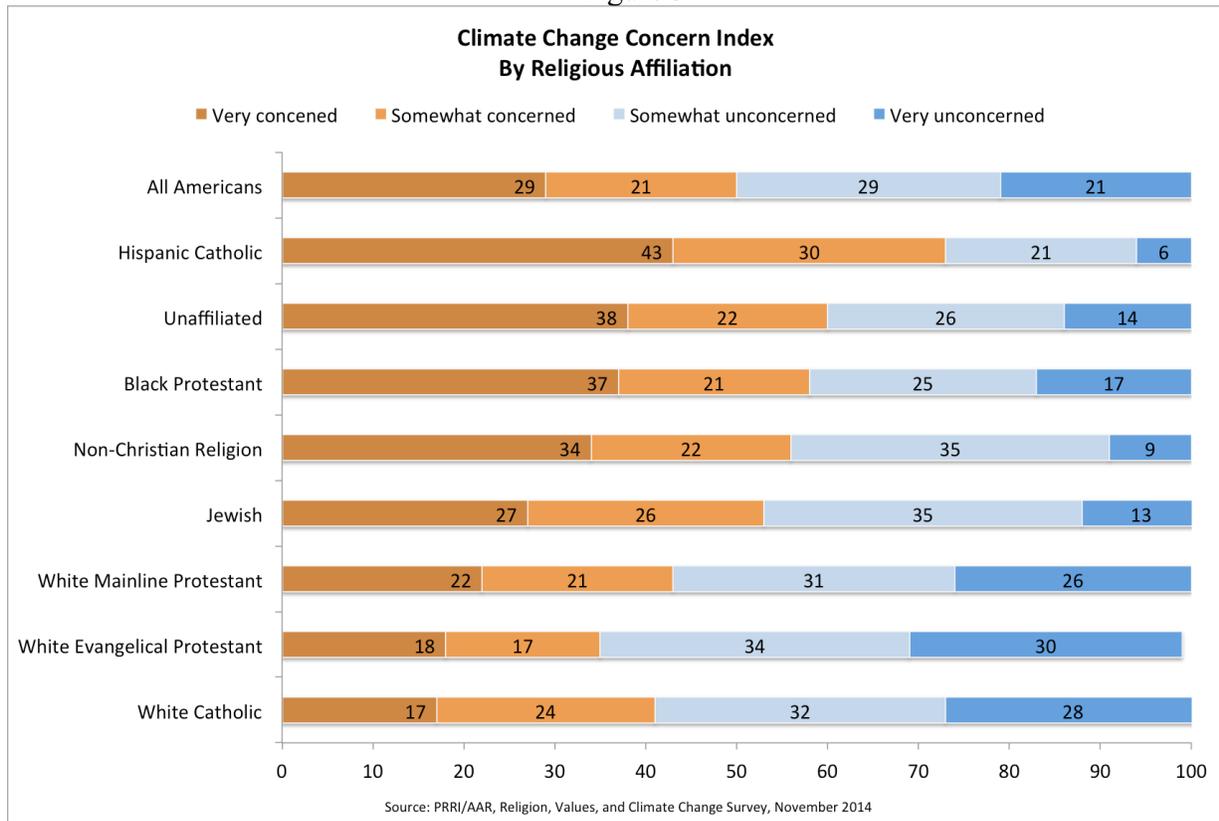
some influence on their flocks when it comes to this issue. But while climate change was identified as an important environmental challenge by many Americans, only 5% considered it to be *the* most important issue facing the U.S. Thus it seems unlikely that these respondents will prioritize dramatic action in response, at least in the near future.

Another noteworthy (though hardly novel) finding was that political party affiliation was the strongest predictor as to whether respondents believed in the strong scientific consensus that human activities were changing the climate or thought strong action in response was warranted. And although it would be unsurprising to close observers of politics in the USA, those whom researchers labeled climate change ‘believers’ (who accepted consensus science) were much more likely to be Democrats than Republicans, and those who identified with the Tea Party were the most likely to reject such science (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014: 19). The strength of political partisanship in shaping climate change beliefs suggests that caution should be exercised when considering the extent to which religion might be an important variable. The ability to control for political affiliation and other confounding variables is, of course, a strength of quantitative studies, and a major reason that more such studies are needed in the study of the religious dimensions of environmental perceptions and behaviors.

There were also interesting and significant correlations between conservative Christian theology and climate science skepticism. Certain doctrines, including biblical end times expectations, were seemingly influential, with 49% of Americans attributing natural disasters ‘to “end times” as described in the bible’, which is especially interesting because fewer, 46%, attribute climate change to human activities (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014: 4, 23). Black Protestants and White Evangelical Protestants attributed weather-related natural disasters to biblical end times in the greatest proportions, 74% and 77% respectively, Catholics even less at 43%, and White mainline Protestants the least at 35%. More surprising were some findings about religiously unaffiliated respondents. Although 57% of them thought human beings were causing global warming and 68% of them attributed the severity of recent weather-related natural disasters to global climate change, a surprising number, 29%, attributed such disasters to biblical end times, even though these respondents appeared to be untethered to Christian traditions (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014: 23). This suggests that popular novels and films promoting apocalyptic end-times beliefs have gained influence beyond the religious enclaves that gave rise to them. It is interesting to imagine all the ways in which such beliefs might confound both scientific and religious beliefs, as well as environment-related behaviors and policies.

In line with other polls, white evangelical Protestants were far more likely to tilt toward the skeptical pole. But in a new twist, the study also revealed that black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics were different from their white counterparts; they were significantly more likely to expect that climate disruption would negatively affect them and others like them and to support action to prevent such impacts, than were white Catholics and protestants; see the Report’s ‘Climate Change Concern Index’, which is reproduced in figure 3 (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014: 15).

Figure 3



Equally intriguing was the finding that whites (whether evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Catholic) were about equal in their skepticism of consensus climate science, while white Catholics were about as likely as white evangelicals to be ‘very concerned’ about climate change (17% and 18%, respectively).

In the Question and Answer portion of the AAR panel, Jones further disclosed the finding that among Hispanic Catholics in the United States, those who are foreign born were even more likely than those born in the U.S. to accept the reality of adverse climate change. In a *New York Times* article about the conference, sociologist Bernard Zaleha suggested that one possible reason for this is ‘because they still have relatives in the global south where the effects of climate change are already being felt’ (Oppenheimer 2014).

For my part, the findings about Hispanic Catholics led me to wonder whether liberation theology and farmworker rights movements, and the tendency of Latinos to work in agro-ecosystems at rates higher than whites, in some combination might have led to greater openness to and awareness of the negative environmental impacts of contemporary industrial/agricultural civilization. I wondered as well about the significance of a 2014 workshop held at the Vatican in which invited scientists presented overviews of the our current environmental predicaments and discussed the corresponding ethical issues – as well as about news reports that in 2015 Pope Francis would release an encyclical in order to promote a global ethical response to what he clearly has come to believe is a climate crisis. Such developments led two of the participants at the Vatican workshop to contend in a short article in *Science* that ‘the Vatican and other religions

can take a decisive role by mobilizing public opinion and public funds' (Dasgupta and Ramanathan 2014: 1458).⁷

Combined with religious and other individuals marching in protest against political inaction, as happened in 2014 in New York City during a United Nations meeting focused on climate change, and given the growing number of statements issued by other religious individuals and groups expressing concern, I wondered whether finally there might be emerging a significant, religion-related response to climate disruption. Is there a global movement of conscience emerging in which religious ideals are playing a role in precipitating involvement among their members and maybe even beyond them? Yet to consider such a question, one must also examine resistance to such trends, if trends there are, by those with more conservative religious, political, economic, and ecological beliefs (Zaleha and Szasz 2014).

I have been involved with several others reviewing all the social scientific literature relevant to such questions that has been produced over the past several decades. A number of us presented some of these findings at the 2014 AAR meeting,⁸ and we expect to publish the results of this work soon. I can preview it here, however, and indicate that the extant research does not provide evidence any strong surge of support among religious believers on behalf of any particular environmental cause. Our presentations challenge facile beliefs that religion is rapidly greening and precipitating a religious movement to slow and adapt to climate disruption. But there is some tantalizing evidence that some cultural enclaves are very engaged with such issues. There is also some evidence that at least some within the world's religious traditions are becoming deeply concerned about environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change, and intend to make ameliorating and adapting to it a priority issue. Indeed, in this issue of the *JSRNC*, there are two more of the many articles that demonstrate that some religious individuals and organizations are responding.

All this said, scholarly work to tease out the role of religious perceptions and practices, in relation to other variables affecting the earth's environmental systems, has barely begun. But as one who has been calling for such research and providing a venue for discussion of it (Taylor 2005b, 2007, 2011), I have been gratified to see growing scholarly attention to whether, when, where, why, and how the world's religions – as well as religion-resembling social phenomena that some may not consider religious – are and are not responding to the broad decline in the diversity and resilience of Earth's living systems. Religions may not be coming to the rescue, as yet. But some of them may eventually prove malleable enough to contribute to the individual and collective changes that are needed if this decline can be mitigated and creative adaptation to it intensified.

⁷ This was a brief report on the meeting and it did not present any research *about* religious influences on environmental behavior.

⁸ The session 'To Green or Not to Green, and Everything in Between: Assessing Trends, Patterns and Gaps in Scholarship on Religion and the Environment' was sponsored by the Sociology of Religion Group and included presentations by Robin Globus Veldman, Gretel van Wieren, Evan Berry, Bernard Zaleha, and myself.

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