

**EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY,**

**GLOBAL WARMING,**

**& STEWARDSHIP**

**ALLISON CULLY**

**RELIGIOUS STUDIES 397**

**APRIL 14, 2008**

The prominence of religious perspectives in politics and social issues has always been evident, and in North America, the Christian perspective dominates. As the science and facts continue to illustrate that global warming is occurring, the topic of climate change becomes an increasingly powerful issue in religious and political realms. Despite the evidence, and the extremely disastrous projected effects of global warming, there are many prominent leaders who refuse to accept the facts and maintain that it is all a myth. A large portion of those who deny global warming is made up of the evangelical right wing. For the purposes of this essay, the term “evangelical” is referring to those Christians whose faith lies in belief in personal conversion, need of forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and the inerrancy of the Bible.

There are indeed a great number of evangelical leaders with an ambivalence or even dissuasion towards ideas around global warming and climate change. In 2007, the New York Times published an editorial referencing well known American evangelist the late Rev. Jerry Falwell’s statement that “global warming (is) Satan's attempt to distract the church from its fight against abortion and gay marriage... and others are using the global warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time... the great moral issues include homosexuality (and gay marriage in particular), abortion and, more broadly, sexual mores among young people.”<sup>1</sup>

America’s National Association of Evangelicals, an organization of over 30 million people, has refused to take a position on global warming. While they have stated that humankind has "a sacred responsibility to steward the Earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part", they also claim that they represent “Bible-believing

---

<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*. “Evangelical Environmentalism” March 10, 2007.

evangelicals [who] disagree about the cause, severity and solutions to the global warming issue". The NAE feared that acknowledging global warming was going "to assume as true certain things that are still debatable, such as that global warming is not only real but also almost certainly going to be catastrophically harmful; second, that it is being driven to a significant extent by human activity; and third, that some regime, some international treaty for mandatory reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, could make a significant enough drop in global emissions to justify the costs to the human economy." <sup>2</sup>

Evidence of these ideas are found in more liberal media sources, which have gone as far as suggesting that evangelicals, including the President of the United States and those who make up the current administration believe that global warming is a sign of end times and the return of Christ, or the rapture, and therefore a good thing. One editorialist from The San Francisco Chronicle described the rapture as "an instant in time when all the truly holy people are taken directly to heaven, leaving their clothes in small neat piles behind them. The rest of the ungodly losers are left to deal with natural disasters and wars and the armies of the Antichrist, after which they die in various colorful ways while the ranks of the saved watch with compassion tempered with an understandable sense of satisfaction."<sup>3</sup> While it is clear that the author of these comments is indeed mocking these fundamentalist beliefs, it is also clear that there are a large number of evangelicals who welcome the idea of end times and therefore see no danger or threat from global warming.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post* "Evangelicals Will Not Take Stand on Global Warming". Thursday, February 2, 2006; Page A08.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Carroll, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Thursday, February 10, 2005.

The great concern about this misconception and denial is quite evident when coupled with the facts about global warming. Skeptics refer to the fact that the Earth has always gone through warming and cooling cycles, which is indeed true. However, global temperatures have been rising since the 1880s and since the 1970s the rate of increase is rising rapidly. Arctic and glacial ice is melting and many of the earth's glaciers have all but disappeared. Many arctic species have been impacted, including polar bears which have drowned while swimming in search of sea ice. Coral reefs which die off from stress caused by small changes in water temperature are suffering greatly and impact the marine ecosystem in which they live where many different species rely on the reef for their food sources. Furthermore, many reefs provide a protective wall to the land that they lay near, sheltering it from strong tidal currents and waves, such as the nation of the Maldives, which is expected to disappear underwater forever due to rising sea levels.<sup>4</sup> From 1990 to 2000, there has been a three-fold increase in natural disaster occurrences, including wildfires, heat waves, and strong tropical storms.

“Industrialization, deforestation, and pollution have greatly increased atmospheric concentrations of water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, all greenhouse gases that help trap heat near Earth's surface. Humans are pouring carbon dioxide into the atmosphere much faster than plants and oceans can absorb it.”<sup>5</sup>

The effects of these changes would be absolutely devastating, putting the billions of people who inhabit the world's coastal cities at risk of flooding due to rising sea levels caused by glacial melting, natural disasters and altered ocean circulation patterns. Food and water

---

<sup>4</sup> *Refugees of the Blue Planet* - National Film Board of Canada

<sup>5</sup> *National Geographic* – Global warming fast facts. June 14, 2007. (accessed on April 11, 2008).

shortages would be certain, and hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of species would face extinction.

What is perhaps more startling than the outright denial of these possibilities is how the roots of the Christian tradition have clear, undeniable teachings of stewardship, reverence and care for the Earth and all of the natural world.

The concept of stewardship is rooted in the idea of humankind acting as protectors or caretakers of God's creations. "Stewardship ethics seek, in short, to allow for humans distinctiveness and a special relationship between humans and God while also placing limits on human freedom and dominion over the rest of nature."<sup>6</sup> Subjection to God is viewed as equal to human power over nature.

Teachings of environmental good will can be found throughout the Christian sacred scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Gospel of Matthew, when asked by a Pharisee, "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "Love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). This can be applied to an environmental perspective, as the Earth must be viewed as God's creation, and neighbours as His children.

An example from the Old Testament is the divine imperative in the book of Genesis, when after creating mankind God said "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground... everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard C. Foltz. *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment* (Thomson Wadsworth. 2003). 328.

for food.” (Genesis 1:28, 30). This imperative is the foundation for the concept of stewardship; that humankind has been entrusted by God to care for His creations, all of which have the same right to life as human beings.

This has been noted throughout the history of Christian philosophy. Thomas Aquinas “summarized the harmonious relationship between God and creation and among different aspects – human and non-human – of that creation in his notion of natural law. “The whole community of the universe is governed by the divine reason” Thus the first key aspect of Thomas’s thought, in relation to understandings of nature, is his insistence that “everything that in any way is, is from God.”, and that all aspects of creation are linked together because “all things partake in some way in the eternal law””.<sup>7</sup> Catholic ecotheologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and Thomas Berry state, “we have no home outside the earth... and so our destruction of this home is the permanent destruction of ourselves as well”.<sup>8</sup>

To deny the facts of global warming, or to remain indifferent towards them is ultimately unchristlike. For a faith rooted in the teachings of Jesus, and embodied by doing God’s will, and acting in His name, every person who calls themselves a Christian has an undeniable duty to care for the Earth to the absolute best of their ability. Stated in both the Old and New Testaments, “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” (Ps. 24:1, I Cor. 10:26). That which belongs to God is therefore holy and must be revered as so.

The ties with these issues and politics are also relevant, particularly in North America where many prominent political leaders call themselves Christians of some form. In Alberta, many political leaders, including former premier Ralph Klein have spoken outright against

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Worldviews, Religion and the Environment*. (Thomson Wadsworth 2003), 324.

<sup>8</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Worldviews, Religion and the Environment*. (Thomson Wadsworth 2003), 327

action to reduce human impact on global warming such as the Kyoto Protocol, which had objectives to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases . In most of these cases, economic motives are behind this. The Alberta government has even released media material claiming that efforts to reduce emissions from the province's tar sands projects will leave Albertans unemployed and hurt the economy. The political examples in America are numerous, including current president George W. Bush, and former president George Bush Sr. who once said that if America were to follow the suggested course of action to combat climate change from "the environmental extreme", they would be "up to our necks in owls and out of work for every American".

However, not every leader is influenced by the evangelical right. Former US senator and Vice-President Al Gore has said "there are good people who are in politics, in both parties who hold this at arm's length because if they acknowledge it and recognize it, then the moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable."<sup>9</sup>

The evidence of the impact of global warming is accumulating, however, and those in the American media and political system can clearly see the results. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the coast of New Orleans and was "the sixth-strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded and the third-strongest hurricane on record that made landfall in the United States"<sup>10</sup>. Results of this disaster included nearly two thousand people dead, over \$80 billion of damage, and some of the most horrendous social atrocities the United States has seen during this century. Leading up to the storm, scientists knew exactly how much water would breach the levies that surround New Orleans, and they also knew that Katrina was going to bring at

---

<sup>9</sup> *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim (Paramount Classics, 2006)

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia – Hurricane Katrina. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina)

least that much, or more. Presently, the same academincs know exactly how much it will take to cover Florida, San Franscisco Bay, Manhattan, Beijing, Shanghai, Calcutta and Bangladesh, coastal regions that are home to tens of millions of people. The amount corresponds to the raised sea levels that are predicted to be the result of parts of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets melting into the ocean. Worldwide, the damage of natural disasters is increasing rapidly as well. In 2004, over 270,000 people died after an earthquake in the Indian Ocean resulted in a series of deadly tsunamis overtaking many of the countries that boarder the ocean.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma senator and former chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Jim Inhofe claimed to offer "compelling evidence that catastrophic global warming is a hoax and that that no meaningful warming has occurred over the last century". In fact, in 2003 he concluded a speech to the US Senate by asking "With all of the hysteria, all of the fear, all of the phony science, could it be that man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people?"<sup>11</sup> . Inhofe often cites the Bible as the source for his stances on various political issues.

It is incomprehensible that this kind of denial still takes place in the face of so much evidence, and in spite of so many Christian teachings of respect for all life and care for all of God's creation. From the time of the writing of the book of Genesis, right to the present day, there is continued documentation of the divine imperative, and of the Christ-like principles of care, respect, and duty. It is a great tragedy for a cosmology based on such pure and loving principles to be corrupted in this manner. Moreover, it is hypocritical, self-defeating and seems to have resulted in spreading more ill-will and hatred than could be imagined. The claims of

---

<sup>11</sup> The Science of Climate Change — Senate Floor Statement by U.S. Sen. James M. Inhofe

those evangelical leaders who see climate change as a distraction from the true Christian calling of winning souls for Christ have failed to see the true teachings of Jesus presented in the Gospels. To love God is to love all of His creation. In the face of global devastation, the utter destruction of the entire planet, human race, and all species on Earth to dispute facts, or even to do nothing is a sin of omission at best. If humans are created in God's image, and God is wise and powerful, then we too have wisdom and power that must be used responsibly.

For those who claim to follow the word of God as written in the Bible, there is no excuse to dispute global warming, and no reason not to take action. Indifference towards the issue is just as sinful, for to sit back and knowingly allow for the destruction of God's creation is a sin against God Himself. In scripture, God appoints humankind to act as stewards of good will on Earth and therefore every Christian must fulfill this role to be free of sin. Nature and humanity are part of creation, and inextricably linked. Just as Eve defied God in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:17), causing curses over man, woman, and serpent, the human race is presently securing the curse over their future existence, and ultimate return to dust.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim (Paramount Classics, 2006).

Carroll, Jon. *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Thursday, February 10, 2005.

Choquette, Hélène & Duval, Jean-Philippe. 2006. *Refugees of the Blue Planet*. Produced by Monique Simard, Marcel Simard, Yves Bisailon, Luc Martin-Gousset. National Film Board of Canada, Point du Jour, Les productions Virage inc.

*Economist*. "A Cross of Green". 12/1/2007, Vol. 385. Issue 8557, p38-38.

Erhard, Nancie. *Moral Habitat – Ethos and agency for the sake of Earth*. State University of New York Press, Albany. 2007.

Foltz, Richard C. *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment – a global anthology*. Thomson Wadsworth. 2003.

*National Geographic* – Global warming fast facts. June 14, 2007. (accessed on April 11, 2008).

Numbers, Ronald L. *Science and Christianity in Pulpit and Pew*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Waldau, Paul and Patton, Kimberley. *A Communion of Subjects – Animals in religion, science and ethics*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

*The Holy Bible*, New International Version.

*The New York Times*[online edition]. "Evangelical Environmentalism" March 10, 2007.

*The Science of Climate Change* — Senate Floor Statement by U.S. Sen. James M. Inhofe. Online text: <http://inhofe.senate.gov/pressreleases/climate.htm>

*The Washington Post* "Evangelicals Will Not Take Stand on Global Warming". Thursday, February 2, 2006; Page A08.

Wikipedia – Hurricane Katrina. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina)

Wikipedia - Jim Inhofe [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Inhofe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Inhofe)