

## ESSAY

## Climate Change and Christian Anthropocentrism

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After a summer of unprecedented heat waves, flooding, hurricanes, and wildfires, incomparable thawing in the Arctic and greening of the Antarctica Peninsula, the release of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, and President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris 2015 Climate Accord, the need for sociologists to critique Christian attitudes and actions vis-à-vis climate change has never been greater. Frankly, there may be nothing more urgent.

The two basic questions about climate change are: Is it happening? and Is it caused by human activity? Science historian Naomi Oreskes surveyed every peer-reviewed physical science journal published from 1992-2002, searching for the keyword phrase "global climate change." Of the 928 articles she identified, not a single one denied that climate change was happening, and that it was anthropogenic. Geologist James Lawrence Powell, Executive Director of the National Physical Science Consortium, surveyed scientific papers from 1991-2013, and of 16,208 papers examined, 25 denied anthropogenesis (.0015%).

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its Fourth Assessment Report 2007, stated that:

- Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as evidenced by increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, the widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level.
- Most of the global warming since the mid-20th century is very likely due to human activities.
- The net damage costs of climate change are likely to be significant and to increase over time.

By its 2013 report, the IPCC stated in the forward that "the science now shows with 95 percent certainty that human activity is the dominant cause of observed warming since the mid-20th century." By its Fifth Assessment Report 2014, the IPCC simply assumed anthropogenic climate change without comment.

The U.S. National Academy of Sciences issued the following statement in 2014: "Climate change is one of the defining issues of our time. It is now more certain than ever, based on many lines of evidence, that humans are changing earth's climate. The atmosphere and oceans

have warmed, accompanied by sea-level rise, a strong decline in Arctic sea ice, and other climate-related changes. The evidence is clear.”

Climate change is as settled as anything gets in the world of science. We should not dismiss what climate scientists say any more readily than we would dismiss what 99% of cardiologist or engineers say. Yet a significant percentage of the public remains skeptical. The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication reported that in 2016, when responding to the statement “Earth is getting warmer,” 70% of Americans agreed, 12% disagreed, and 18% were unsure. To the statement that “Earth is getting warmer mostly because of human activities,” 53% of Americans agreed, 32% disagreed, and 15% were unsure. In a spring 2015 poll of people in 40 different countries, Pew Research Center reported that 46% denied that climate change is a problem. In a fall 2016 poll, Pew Research Center reported that 35% of Americans denied that climate change is a problem, and 52% of Americans denied that it is anthropogenic.

So why do so many people still deny climate change? One obvious factor is fear. People simply do not want climate change to be true, because it is bad news. That is understandable. A second factor is vested interests. People have financial motives for climate change not being true, or believed, and vested interests drive belief and behavior far more than reason or science. It is no surprise that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce denies climate change. But a third factor is the public relations campaigns of the fossil fuel industry. The climate change denial industry manufactures skepticism, uncertainty, and doubt where there is none scientifically. Right-wing think tanks with conservative economic policies, backed by industrial interests, are using the same PR firms, personnel, and tactics that the tobacco industry used for fifty years to create doubt in the public’s mind, long after the tobacco industry knew tobacco was lethally harmful. Think tanks such as the Heartland Institute, the Marshall Institute, and the Cato Institute received money from tobacco companies in the 1990s to challenge the general consensus that smoking was unhealthy. Currently, fossil fuel companies fund those same think tanks to attack climate science. For example, Exxon Mobil and Koch Industries have spent tens of millions of dollars promoting climate change denial.

Yet the consequences to humans of climate change are already manifest. Drought is producing food insecurity and the creep of growing seasons northward. Climate volatility is producing severe weather that is massively destructive and expensive. World temperatures hit a record high for the third year in a row in 2016. As of 2016, the temperature of the earth had already risen 1.1° C above what it was prior to the Industrial Revolution, on its way to the 2.0° C point of threatening human survival. Rising sea water levels threaten major coastal cities around the world. The environmental injustice of people who have contributed the least to climate change commonly suffering the direst consequences will produce tens of millions of climate refugees in the next decade or two. The dawn of the Anthropocene, the geological period of the human, is already upon us.

Sociology can explicate well the macro anthropogenic causes of climate change: the disenchantment of the natural world in modernity, the Enlightenment ideals and myths of progress, the industrial revolution, the neoliberal imperialism that culminates in globalization, the contemporary consumer culture and simple Western arrogance. But underneath them all lies the first, primary cause, that foundational belief in human exceptionalism known as anthropocentrism. It maintains that humans are separate from and superior to all other life on the earth, are the pre-eminent species on earth, and are the entitled rulers and users of earth, not members of a larger community of life. It assumes that rights apply only to humans, that earth is the stage upon which humans perform, and that ultimately only human life is important life. Anthropocentrism contrasts sharply with biocentrism, also known as deep-ecology, which advocates deep egalitarianism, or the view that humans are one species among many with no special rights or privileges. Biocentrism sees humans as essentially members, not masters, of life on earth.

And what about Christians? In his seminal 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. asserted that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,” and as such is a significant, if not the primary cause of environmental degradation and climate change. “We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve (humans).” Indeed, the conventional historic reading of “have dominion” in Genesis 1:26 and 28 has been to separate humans from nature and place humans above nature. Granted, the traditional reading of Genesis 2:15 is less domineering – the human was placed in the garden “to cultivate and keep it,” best translated as to serve and guard it.

Yet in Genesis 9, God’s covenant is not just with Noah and his offspring, but with all life on earth. After the flood, when humans start over with the full realization of their capacity for sin, including domination, God again tells them to procreate and fill the earth. But this time there is no call to subdue the earth or have dominion over it. It is now clear that humans will mess that up, badly. And animals will live in fear of humans from now on. Later, God forbids the notion of land as privately owned property: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev. 25:23). Even Psalm 8:3-8, so easily read as supporting anthropocentrism, is, in the context of Psalms 7-10, not so much a hymn of triumph as an expression of amazement that God continues to bless humans despite their actions. The context is a plea for God’s justice and deliverance despite human violence and oppression. The hard reality of self-serving human domination has exposed the false hope of anthropocentric human glory and honor.

The first verses of Genesis 1 describe how God in the beginning forged the world in water. But humans soon sinned so irrepressibly that God destroyed the world with water, saving only a faithful remnant, after which God promised never to do so again (Gen 8:21).

Much later in the New Testament, Peter describes how “in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying... all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:3-4). And they will “deliberately ignore” that the earth “was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished” (3:5-6). Consequently, Peter foresees that the world will in fact be destroyed again, but this time by fire. Yet he does not foretell that it will be God’s doing. Today, science asserts that it is humans who have created the age of fire, not God. If we continue to burn our finite and befouling fossil fuels to feed our greed unabated, we will inevitably destroy ourselves. Only the community that deliberately ignores the destruction of water is doomed to the destruction of fire. If we continue to indulge the lusts of scoffers and unleash fire upon the earth, will God save us again, this time from ourselves?

As much as biblical exegetes today insist that “having dominion” in Genesis means environmental stewardship, not utilitarianism, the latter is in fact how it has been interpreted and applied throughout most of Christian history. As in so many other realms of life, it is one thing to ask the exegetical question of what Christian elites have thought we ought to think and do. It is quite another to ask the sociological question of how ordinary everyday Christians have actually thought and acted (cf. Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*).

The central theological question is what centers the universe. Which is more biblical, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, or a theocentrism which sees God as the rightful center of the cosmos? Clearly the world belongs to God, not humans, because God created it and sustains it. “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world, and all those who live in it” (Psa. 24:1). As part of creation, humans have more in common with other forms of life than we have differences from them. We are neither the measure of creation nor the purpose of creation. Our task and privilege is to worship the Maker in concert with all creatures.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI released an encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he affirmed anthropocentrism relative to the environment. Nevertheless, in 2015, Pope Francis released an encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, in which he attributed climate change and environmental degradation to human causes, described offense to the earth as sinful, and framed climate change as a justice issue. Among the human causes he listed were “the throw-away culture” (Articles 20-26) and “the globalization of the technocratic paradigm” (Articles 106-114). As a result, Catholics globally consistently have more concern about climate change than Protestants, according to Pew Research Center (2015).

American evangelicals have also released formal statements. Over ten years ago in 2006, the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) issued a “Call to Action,” declaring that a) human induced climate change is real, b) the consequences will be significant, and will hit the poor the hardest, c) Christian moral convictions demand our response, and d) the need to act now is urgent. It had signatures of 86 evangelical leaders. However, it provoked an immediate conservative backlash. Within months, the evangelical Cornwall Alliance issued a “A Call to

Truth” in which it a) rejected climate science, b) argued that global warming is due to natural causes, not human activity, c) stated that God, not people, is responsible for the environment, d) advocated an increase of fossil fuel consumption, not a decrease, because the best way to care for the poor is to increase energy consumption and expand industry, and e) declared that the most important moral imperative was to keep energy inexpensive and promote economic growth. It had signatures of 170 evangelical leaders. In 2009, the Cornwall Alliance issued a “Renewed Call to Truth.”

We believe Earth and its ecosystems – created by God’s intelligent design and infinite power and sustained by His faithful providence – are robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting, admirably suited for human flourishing, and displaying His glory. Earth’s climate system is no exception. Recent global warming is one of many natural cycles of warming and cooling in geologic history.

We deny that Earth and its ecosystems are the fragile and unstable products of chance, and particularly that Earth’s climate system is vulnerable to dangerous alteration because of minuscule changes in atmospheric chemistry. Recent warming was neither abnormally large nor abnormally rapid. There is no convincing scientific evidence that human contribution to greenhouse gases is causing dangerous global warming.

The world is in the grip of an idea: that burning fossil fuels to provide affordable, abundant energy is causing global warming that will be so dangerous that we must stop it by reducing our use of fossil fuels, no matter the cost. Is that idea true? We believe not. We believe that idea – we’ll call it “global warming alarmism” – fails the tests of theology, science, and economics.

The Cornwall Alliance has strong ties to the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, which is funded by Exxon-Mobil and Chevron.

In 2009, the World Evangelical Alliance issued a “Declaration on Creation Stewardship and Climate Change.” The following are excerpts from its ten points:

3. ...Through our ignorance, neglect, arrogance, and greed, we have harmed the earth and broken creation's relationships. Our failure to be faithful stewards has caused the current environmental crisis, leading to climate change, and putting the earth's ecosystems at risk. All creation has been subjected to futility and decay because of our disobedience.

5. We confess that we have sinned. We have not cared for the earth with the self-sacrificing and nurturing love of God. Instead, we have exploited, consumed, and abused it for our own advantage. We have too often yielded to the idolatry that is greed.... we have not acted justly towards each other or towards creation, and we have not honored God.

7. We repent of our self-serving theology of creation, and our complicity in unjust local and global economic relationships...

8. We will seek appropriate ways to restore and build just relationships among human beings and with the rest of creation. We will strive to live sustainably, rejecting consumerism and the resulting exploitation...

10. There is no more time for delay or denial...

So it is that an entire spectrum of Christian positions on the environment exists, with the poles perhaps best termed “anthropocentric stewardship” and “theocentric servanthood,” containing the following elements:

## **Anthropocentric Stewardship ← → Theocentric Servanthood**

### ***Concept of God***

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is the ultimate provider of resources for humans</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is the Creator and Redeemer of all</li> <li>- loves all creation equally</li> <li>- desires shalom for all creation</li> </ul> |
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### ***Concept of Humans***

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are rulers God has left in charge, responsible to Him</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are lovers and servants of earth</li> </ul> |
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### ***Concept of Earth***

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is a resource for humans</li> <li>- is a means to an end</li> <li>- good stewardship maintains a good relationship with God</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is a counterpart creation of God</li> <li>- is an end in itself</li> <li>- is not dependent on human relationship with God</li> </ul> |
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### ***Ethics and Morality***

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- earth cannot be sinned against because it has no moral status</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- earth has intrinsic value</li> <li>- redemption is cosmic, not limited to humans as the exception</li> </ul> |
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### ***Attitude and Behavior***

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>= entitlement</li> <li>- stewardship rhetoric as cover for exploitation</li> <li>- is focused on loving and serving God</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>= humility</li> <li>- minimizing one’s ecological footprint</li> <li>- is focused on loving and serving all others</li> </ul> |
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**Love of Earth**

eros = self-gratification

- desire to possess earth

→ loving the earth to death

agape = self-sacrifice

- wants only what is best for earth

→ staying away as the most loving act

**Critique of Servanthood**

- it is conflation of creator and creation

- it is worship of creation

**Critique of Stewardship**

- it is license for domination

- it is environmental utilitarianism

In sober reflection and assessment, a stewardship perspective alone is insufficient. Christians are called not just to respect the earth as God's handiwork, and care for the earth in some kind of condescending, patronizing human assumption of our superiority and superordination. In the end, we are not stewards of the earth. We are called to indwell the earth, because we are part of it. How the Spirit indwells us is instructive about the meaning of indwelling. Does the Spirit care for us? Steward us? For humans to indwell the earth means to be permanently placed or implanted within the earth as embodied beings, to inhabit it, not just reside in it. As David Orr differentiated, a resident is a temporary occupant, who knows and cares little about locale beyond its ability to gratify. An inhabitant is rooted in place, has an intimate, organic, mutually nurturing relationship with a place, and cannot be separated from habitat without doing violence to both.

Climate change is not a scientific issue. That is settled. Whether to respond is not a political issue. That is imperative, though how best to mobilize can be debated. Climate change is a moral issue, perhaps the greatest moral challenge ever faced by humanity. And Christian complicity with climate change to date may be the greatest moral failure of Christian history. Now we face the greatest moral challenge ever. Are Christians truly, consistently pro-life? If Christians are truly pro-life because human life is sacred, then it is insufficient and frankly incoherent to be pro-life only about abortion at the beginning of the individual's life, and about medical assistance in dying at the end of the individual's life, while living every day in a way that threatens all life. Never in history have humans had to make such deliberate, radical choices. Will we? How will we? On what collective moral basis?

From the beginning, all humans, especially Christians, have been called not just to care for the earth, but to indwell it. In the last hundred years, we've messed up badly. We've sinned in a way that may not be redeemable. And if we in the global north do not radically change the way we live by vigorously pursuing alternative sources of energy, an alternative economy, and alternative lifestyles, it will be catastrophic in the truest sense of the word, not in the glib sense of its everyday use. Or in more theological language, it will be apocalyptic. If we in the global north do not make radical changes to the collective way we live, twenty-five years from now little else will matter.