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Greening the Media

# Can Religious Identity Inspire Pro-Environmental Action?

Research says: Not so much.

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Our last two columns explored the role that individualism plays in creating ecological problems. This ideology is so powerful that most Americans believe they've never received help from the government. But on average, we use about four government programs throughout our lives!

And the results of individualism can be harmful to our planet: it feeds resistance to government programs that protect the environment; it can nurture environmental racism; and it promotes destructive transportation systems in support of an unsustainable car culture, among other social liabilities.

From an ecological perspective, is it possible to turn this American ideology toward pro-environmental thinking and collective action? On the face of it, that looks almost impossible. Individual motivations are always hampered by uncertainty, which is increasingly the product of a "doubt industry" of climate-change denial that is financed by fossil-fuel billionaires. Commercial media promote outward signs of wealth that taunt Americans with aspirations of individual worth that most can never hope to achieve. Political apathy and ecological disengagement are the by-products.

Religion is said to play a healing role in the stressful gap between capitalist promises and realities. It offers hope and rekindles the inspiration that individuals need to act positively on the side of the natural environment, or any social good for that matter. But here too, spirituality and religiosity are fragmented and commoditized as features of affluence and personal peace. From evangelical mega-churches to pop-psychology textbooks, you pay for your faith.

That said, social-scientific studies show that religion has the power to shape worldviews, cultivate collective identity, and provide networks of communication for social action (across a spectrum of reactionary to progressive interventions). In a recent review essay, the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science* asked whether religion's social influence could become a "pathway to ecological concern."

The answer seems to be "not so much."

Radically divergent readings of canonical texts militate against clearly pro-environmental religious perspectives. In some Judeo-Christian teachings, humans are encouraged to see themselves as the chosen ones who have been selected to dominate all other inhabitants of the Earth. On the other hand, there's the caretaker view, exemplified by Pope Francis' recent encyclical on the environment in which he harshly criticizes the "dominion" position as a misreading of scripture.

The dominion camp is not alone in promoting human exploitation of the environment. One sect sees the Earth as an insignificant obstacle on the way to the Second Coming, which a shocking 41 percent of Americans believe will occur by 2050. The end-of-times ideology also fits neatly with both acquisitive individualism and

hyper-commercial culture. The short-term satisfaction of desires is more highly valued than long-term social interests; planet be damned.

The extent to which religious leaders talk to adherents about their place in the natural world depends on whether they endorse dominion, doomsday, or caretaker positions. The more “environmentally engaged” the clergy, the more one finds ecological concerns among their followers, and vice versa.

Non-Judeo-Christian religions offer examples of belief systems that promote moral consideration of the natural world. This has translated into legislation honoring and protecting eco-systems within national borders, in some cases giving nature the legal equivalent of human rights. But even in countries with pro-environmental laws and thriving traditional cultures of conservation, problems of ecological decline persist, due to the international, intercultural influence of climate change and the persistence of economic drives towards growth.

Divergent religious identities also generate disputes in legal care of duty. For example, the director of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, is known for his anti-environmental politics (funded to the tune of \$20 million from the energy industry) and his ultra-conservative religious commitments (of the Southern Baptist sort). Episcopalians opposed his appointment to direct the EPA because of his rejection of climate science. In contrast, hundreds of evangelical and conservative Catholic leaders opposed his nomination on the grounds that environmental protection is a pro-life issue.

Statistical studies offer further confirmation of such inconsistent associations between religious identities and environmental interests. According to a study published by the Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans consider education and the media to be much more influential than religion in determining their understanding of climate change.

The study also showed that “political party affiliation and race and ethnicity” are stronger predictors of environmental beliefs than religious affiliation. 70 percent of Latinos think global warming is caused by human activity; within that group, 77 percent of Catholics think so. 56 percent of African Americans in general and black protestants in particular believe in human-caused climate change.

The bigger difference comes here: 28 percent of white evangelicals think humans cause climate change; overall, 44 percent of whites think this is the case.

On specific ecological matters, things get weirder: more evangelical and mainline protestants support offshore oil drilling than unaffiliated groups; religious affiliation doesn’t significantly affect support or opposition to nuclear plants; more protestants of all creeds and races tend to favor hydraulic fracturing (fracking) than do unaffiliated groups.

When the Pew researchers controlled for all other factors, their analyses showed that neither church attendance nor religious affiliation played a significant role in shaping views on climate change. So where does that leave us?

It appears that congregational and other communication networks can be used to raise awareness of environmental issues. The orientation of that awareness depends on where religious leaders fall on the dominion-caretaker spectrum. Pro-environmental commitments probably depend on collective religious identities cultivated through caretaker teachings. In the process, the intervention of racial identity and political party affiliation may be defining factors.



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