Religion and climate change: The politics of hope and fear

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Climate change is, according to a former Australian Prime Minister, ‘the greatest moral challenge of our time.’ Kevin Rudd may simply have been trying for some catchy political rhetoric. Yet the questions that climate change raises about responsibility for climate-induced disasters, displacement of people and animals and its detrimental impact on the world’s poorest people make clear that there is more than simply scientific reputations and economic productivity at stake.

The moral dimensions of climate change, alongside its potential to alter or indeed end life as we know it on this planet, suggest a significant link between climate change and religion. The world’s religions are, after all, concerned with ultimate questions of morality and the meaning of human existence. Yet often the climate change debate ignores contributions from any quarters other than science or economics, even when these contributions are already implicit within the very language we use to talk about climate change.

Between redemption and armageddon

Activists and politicians alike frequently make use of religious imagery and rhetoric when talking about climate change, though this is no doubt largely unconscious. The influence of religious language on the climate change debate is most clearly seen in how it is described — either as a catastrophic, cataclysmic event of potentially apocalyptic proportions, and/or as an opportunity for transformation, for rebirth, renewal and change.

Wavering between hope and Armageddon, religious language is often unproblematically adopted by climate change scientists and environmentalists alike to discuss the potential future risks and possibilities associated with climate change mitigation and adaptation. One example of this is Tim Flannery’s \(^1\) most recent book *Here on Earth: A New Beginning*, the title of which is a phrase borrowed from The Lord’s Prayer. Global civil society activists and academics engaged in campaigns for climate justice frequently paint pictures of a crisis of eschatological dimensions, calling for action before it is ‘too late’.\(^2\)
Such extremes, though well-intentioned, are somewhat unhelpful. Not only to they generate an all-or-nothing scenario that leaves many people feeling disempowered, they also reduce the role of religion—along with other non-scientific, non-economic domains of life—to little more than a caricature.

However, key figures in the climate change debate have recently begun to highlight not only the presence of religion in climate change discourse but also its significance. Mike Hulme’s\textsuperscript{3} book, \textit{Why We Disagree About Climate Change}, as discussed by Martin Mulligan in this volume\textsuperscript{4}, unpacks in detail the impact of Judeo-Christian beliefs on the ways in which we talk about climate change, but also, crucially, the ways in which faith and more conscious spirituality can make an important contribution to our efforts to adapt and respond to the uncertainties offered by climate change.

\textbf{A matter of science?}\

And yet, despite the significant influence of religion on the ways in which we think and talk about climate change, its presence in the climate change debate is still surprising, unexpected and, to many, strange and out of place. After all, climate change, as it is predominantly discussed in Western politics and society, is a primarily scientific affair and science and religion are diametrically opposed to one another—aren’t they?

Before unpacking the assumptions present in this statement further, let’s first take it at face value. The obvious response to the question is ‘yes’ and for evidence, one need only look at the influence of right-wing, conservative, frequently religiously-affiliated climate skeptics, most notably in the Australian and US contexts. Such voices claim that science is trying to bamboozle us in some kind of conspiracy (exactly what the purpose of this conspiracy is remains largely unclear). They make use of Genesis 1:28, where God tells the human beings He has just created to ‘fill the earth and subdue it.’ They argue this verse demonstrates that, from the beginning, human beings were superior to nature and God intended that humanity would control nature and use it for our own dominance and power. This perspective, while loud in contemporary climate change debates, is by no means new, and is arguably embedded in the Western psyche, providing a basis for consumerist culture and market-driven economics.\textsuperscript{5}

This particular version of climate skepticism relies on privileging the Judeo-Christian scriptures over the authority of science. Science may have experiments, equipment, rational thought and thousands of years of knowledge on which to base its claims about climate change—but we have God. The significant attention given to this viewpoint by mainstream media explains why, at least with regard to climate change, religion and science appear like water and oil. It also provides further evidence as to why many people view religion as an irrational and unhelpful influence on politics and public life.
A call to good stewardship

Yet this view, while receiving a lot of airtime in the mainstream media, is in fact quite marginal amongst many religious traditions. Both the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, the two largest global Christian bodies, promote a completely different approach to climate change and to science. Instead of promoting the dominance of humanity over nature and the rest of creation, these two international religious bodies promote the view that human beings are responsible for creation, that it is our job to care for, protect, nurture and be good stewards of the world around us. Rather than arrogantly proclaiming humanity’s superiority over the rest of creation, justifying our control, use and abuse of nature for our own purposes, the WCC and the global Catholic Church put forward a somewhat more humble interpretation of Genesis 1:28. We are called to be good and responsible stewards over creation, to protect and nurture it, not contribute to its destruction. The Vatican’s own scientific research institute, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences released a report on shrinking mountain glaciers in May 2011, in which it emphasised the sense of stewardship and responsibility shared by all humanity. ‘By acting now, in the spirit of common but differentiated responsibility, we accept our duty to one another and to the stewardship of a planet blessed with the gift of life’. Science and rationality, in this view, are not seen as the enemies of faith, but rather are seen as gifts from God, gifts that enable us to think, to make good and responsible decisions about how we care for our world.

No room! No room!

But let’s go back to that statement again—climate change is a primarily scientific affair and religion and science are diametrically opposed to one another. There are two assumptions within this observation that I want to highlight and question. The first of these is the dominance of science in the climate change debate. Rather like the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland, scientists, the government and the media often successfully convince us that there is ‘no room’ for anything other than scientific perspectives on climate change, when in fact, as Alice so astutely observes, ‘there is plenty of room’. Many of the contributions in this volume highlight that climate change affects and interacts with every part of our lives. Consequently, it should not just be left to scientists, economists and politicians to decide how we respond to and deal with climate change. Debating how we respond to climate change should include community groups, artists, writers, actors, dancers, academics, lawyers, and yes, even theologians and religious leaders. Not only do each of these groups of people possess unique insights that can contribute to shaping how we respond to climate change, they are also able to translate the at times lofty and opaque scientific language of climate change into mediums and experiences that enable a more personal, intimate and lived connection with the consequences of climate change. An art work or piece of music that attempts to represent the consequences...
of climate change can have far greater impact than a dry recitation of the scientific projections and statistics about how climate change will affect sea levels, crop growth, health and so on.

In the same way, religion, through prayer, ritual, meditation, theological teaching and ethical reflection, can contribute to helping us develop strategies for coping with and responding to climate change. Indeed, as Richard Wollin has observed, religion may be the only other comprehensive belief system strong enough to challenge the dominance of self-centred laissez-faire consumerism that has contributed so much to the problem of climate change. ‘The religious values of love, community, and godliness help to offset the global dominance of competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and manipulation that predominate in the vocational sphere. Religious convictions encourage people to treat each other as ends in themselves rather than as mere means’. 8

So climate change is not merely a scientific affair, but affects every part of life—intellectual, spiritual, emotional, aesthetic, relational. As such, space should be made for listening to the contributions from religious actors on this pressing global issue.

Oil and water?

This leads to the second assumption implicit within the statement above—that science and religion are diametrically opposed to one another. Again, at first glance, many would agree. Science, after all, is based on reason and evidence. Religion, surely, is based on emotions, spirituality and is largely irrational. Such an approach, however, sets up a false dichotomy between religion and science, between rationalism and spirituality and emotion. This dichotomy has existed in the social sciences for some time, yet is becoming increasingly untenable as we begin to recognise that what we understand as rational is based on a cultural privileging of a particular type of knowledge, a cultural privileging largely based on the ideology of Western secularism.

This view argues that the world can be divided into distinct categories based around reason and irrationalism. Reason, science, common sense cannot co-exist with emotion, religion and aesthetics. They must be separated from one another for the purposes of preserving the common good. This argument ignores the immense interconnections between reason and emotion, science and religion and the difficulties of separating the one from the other, since they are mutually constitutive. Further, however, this view overlooks the rich, positive, beneficial contributions that those seemingly ‘irrational’ elements—emotion, religion and aesthetics—have made and can make to politics and public life.

This view that science and religion are diametrically opposed to one another also ignores the significant historical influence that religion had on the emergence of scientific methodologies and approaches. It overlooks the intimate relationship that has existed between science and religion for many
centuries, a relationship that has only recently been obscured. Arguably, both science and religion have at their foundation the same goal—to more fully understand the universe and how it operates. They simply take different approaches to the same question.

Not only, then, is there significant, if implicit, influence from religion on the discourse around climate already, there is also substantial justification for expanding the place of religion—along with other ‘non-scientific’ fields of knowledge and experience—in climate change discussions and debates. Religion offers us moral insight on the issue of climate change, by suggesting value frameworks for determining who is responsible for the consequences of climate change and how they should act to meet their responsibilities. It offers us guidance for how to think about and respond to climate change, as well as numerous ways in which to make the experience and consequences of climate change more real and intelligible for individuals and communities. Finally, science and religion have long had a close connection that has only relatively recently (in the last few hundred years, with the advent of modernity) come under question. It is perhaps time we remembered these interconnections and, as Mike Hulme has also suggested, draw more on the substantial resources available to us from within religion in attempting to address ‘the greatest moral challenge of our time.’

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**Endnotes**


