

The Theology of Climate Change

Daniel Francis Olivieri

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Abstract

Even though this is the first time I'm meeting him, I can tell that professor Alexander is a warm person. He even has candy right there on his coffee table for you to take. This friendly demeanor makes it somewhat disconcerting when he predicts an apocalypse. With a wide smile, he says, "People have the wrong idea about climate change. They think that it will be just like this, but warmer. That's not what it's going to be like. It's going to be like, 'How do we keep our society together while one third of our population is forced to move, the water resources are strained to their capacity, and at least 25% of all known animal species go extinct?'" I tell him that I'm hoping to write a fictional essay from the perspective of a priest in the year 2050. It'll be about him finally realizing that religious leaders should have listened to all of the mounting evidence of climate change earlier. In the kindest terms possible, professor Alexander explains to me why that wouldn't make a very good essay. Why? Because it just wouldn't be the slightest bit fair to religion. Almost every major faith has released statements urging followers to help combat climate change and organizations like Operation Noah are channeling religion to help defend the environment.[1][2] So instead of writing that fictional essay which pits science and religion against each other, I'm writing this (rather optimistic) non-fiction essay about what could happen if they not only worked together, but combined.

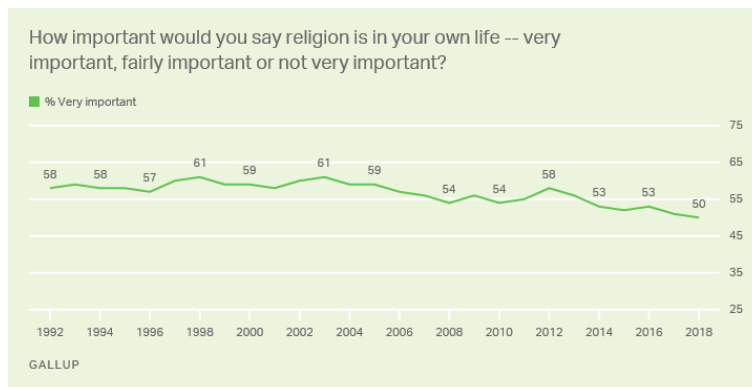
1 Why Religion Needs Science

Humans have learned to perform quite a few miracles previously reserved for the almighty. These include: growing our own babies, bestowing sight to the blind, and casting out disease. [3][4][5] The magician Criss Angel even does a trick where he walks on water.[6] Yes, science has allowed man to develop his own arsenal of miracles. Disasters, however, those were once the providence of God alone. In the past, one could look up at a jagged run of lightning as it set a barn on fire and exclaim in terror, "That was an act of God!" However, by 2050, the hurricanes that lay waste to cities will not be acts of God, but acts of man. For proof of this, we need look no further than the system for classifying storms. Ever since humans have been recording them, storms have remained within the five levels of the Saffir-Simpson scale.[7] However, meteorologists now expect

they will soon have to add a new class of storm to account for the previously unheard of wind speeds that will be arriving to terrorize our coasts.[8] Thus, it is reasonable to say that God made the Earth capable of storms that fell into the first five categories. Humans, though, we are responsible for the storms that fall into the sixth. Larger hurricanes are not where the problems end, of course. The problem of water scarcity reminds me of a couplet famously quoted by James Baldwin which goes,

“God gave Noah the rainbow sign
There’s no more water,
the fire next time” [9]

No more water will be right. The combination of rising temperatures, changing climates, and greater populations will make water more scarce than ever. Forget gold, frankincense, and myrrh, if Christ were to be born in 2050 He would be lucky to have enough water to drink, much less be baptised in.[10] It’s not just the Middle East that will face this problem. The Ogallala Aquifer, which currently supplies water for more than 2.3 million people in the American West is on track to be depleted in less than fifty years.[11] The aquifer should replenish itself naturally, a process which is expected to take no more than six thousand years. How the inhabitants of the area will get access to water in the intervening millennia is anyone’s guess. The theological problem with environmental catastrophes like these is that there is no rainbow sign from Yahweh to wait for because He didn’t cause these problems in the first place. Faced with human-caused problems, many people may begin to search for human answers rather than religious ones. The result of these changes may be that, for many, there will no longer be a place in the sky for God. Add these problems to the slow decline that faith is already seeing in the US, and organized religion is on track to see major problems.[12] A partnership with science would show that it has the power to combat these very present dangers on behalf of the everyday people who face them.



2 Why Science Needs Religion

With the daunting task of dealing with climate change, the scientific community may realize that it needs some of what religion has to offer. Even with thousands of journals full of evidence, even with overwhelming consensus among the scientific community, even with \$50 billion dollars in damages caused by storms in the USA last year alone, science is having trouble making people believe that climate change is a real issue. Religion, however, has never had a problem with inspiring belief. It had people walking fearlessly into lions' dens before science had converted even its earliest adherents. Facts, on empiricism, the replication of results, these some how don't move a person's spirit the way a good story does. Fortunately, stories are the stock and trade of religion. Despite lacking annotated bibliographies, the gospel, the Vedas, and the Torah have all inspired the deepest belief. It's this level of faith that science will need if it is to combat the enormous powers that face it; powers like ExxonMobil, which by itself has produced 3.22% of all human fossil fuel emissions *since the year 1751* or Chevron which has released even more.[13]

3 What Religion and Science Could Look Like Together

So what will the union look like if the two ever wed? Well, science can start off by canonizing its most famous martyrs and missionaries: the Curies, the astronauts aboard the *Challenger*, Laika. There could be vitamins placed into communion wafers, lab coats that double as vestments, explosive chemistry demonstrations to liven up Sunday Mass, theological papers written in latex. The Mythologist Joseph Campbell started seeing the similarities back in the 1980's when he said, "Computers are like Old Testament God: lots of rules and no mercy." [14]

This union could mean hopeful things for the environment in particular. Missionaries could be sent to plant much-needed trees in tropical forests. Rather than just abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and Fridays during Lent, the faithful could cut out meat all together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Congregations could install solar panels on and around their places of worship, thus taking in even more of God's bounty.

I write all of this, knowing that it is foolishly optimistic. Now, however, is the time to be foolishly optimistic. The alternative is unthinkable. But at least I'm not the only one thinking optimistically, Pope Francis is as well. In a speech about climate change he said, "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home . . . Truly, much can be done!" [15]

References

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