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Vatican Report Shines Light on Climate Change Divisions Within the U.S. Faith Community

By JEAN CHEMNICK of

When the Vatican released a report last week calling man-made climate change "serious and potentially irreversible" and advocating aggressive action to curb emissions, it stirred up old divisions within the U.S. faith community over whether human activity can affect creation and what should be done about it.

It is a question that divides people of the same religion and denomination.

Some, like the interfaith members of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care who visited Capitol Hill last week to lobby for climate change legislation, believe that man-made greenhouse gases are an example of human activity threatening creation and unjustly subjecting the Earth's most vulnerable populations to climate-related privation and violence.

Others -- often from relatively similar religious backgrounds -- point to scripture as the basis for their belief that only God can cause a destructive change in climate and that the poor are more likely to suffer from expensive energy than from weather disasters.

The Rev. Mitchell Hescox, president of the Evangelical Environmental Network, is firmly in the first camp. He said last week that he expects Christians in particular to play a key role in eventually persuading lawmakers, especially Republicans, to support curbs on emissions.

Hescox said the religious community was already making inroads on the issue when the economy tanked in 2008 and would do so again when the economy is fully recovered.

"I think the fear over job loss has sort of trumped the issue of climate change for a short time," he said.

While acknowledging that evangelical Christians are far from unanimous in viewing climate change as a threat, Hescox predicted that would change. He noted that evangelical Christian attitudes toward the AIDS epidemic evolved radically from a decade ago, when the disease was viewed by conservative Christians as part of the homosexual lifestyle, to today's view that it is a

pandemic that affects people from all walks of life.

"I think that's the educational place we are in now" on climate, he said. "This isn't just a sound bite, this isn't limited to one people, this isn't just the former vice president talking about an inconvenient truth, this is something that affects hundreds of thousands of lives each year right now and is going to put tremendous strains on the developing world."

Hescox said Christian concern about man-made climate change would be awakened when it became clear that vulnerable populations would have to shoulder the worst effects. Like the Vatican report (*ClimateWire*, May 6), Hescox predicted that these would include famine, war, unrest and less access to water.

Richard Cizik, president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good and another supporter of curbs to climate emissions, said that one tool in convincing evangelicals and Catholics to lobby for climate change -- and Christian politicians to listen to them -- is to encourage them to think about judgment day.

"The only strategy is to convince enough evangelicals and Catholics -- these two enormous constituencies in America -- that this is in their best interest -- the best interest of the country, of the planet, and importantly the best interest of themselves eternally," Cizik said. "Because we will be held accountable."

"I'm not shy," he said, describing meetings with pro-fossil fuels lawmakers when he called them out for putting "temporal" concerns like re-election ahead of the health of their souls.

Still, Cizik said too few evangelicals now share his view that climate mitigation is a moral and spiritual imperative, which makes his work more complicated.

"We're going to have to spend a whole lot more effort trying to energize grass-roots evangelicals and Republican lawmakers than frankly we've had the capacity to do in this small evangelical movement that we have going here, that hasn't proven up to the task thus far," he said.

Climate science vs. 'omniscient designer'

Meanwhile, many of the larger evangelical groups continue to believe that man-made climate change is not happening, or if it is happening that the results are modest.

This view is in part based on theology.

At a 2009 hearing of the Energy and Commerce Committee partly devoted to the religious community's views on climate change, Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.) quoted from Genesis.

"Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his has been evil from childhood," Shimkus said. "And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done."

The view that only God can usher in catastrophic climate change is counter to the idea of free will, Hescoc said.

"You can only have it one way," Hescoc said. "You can either have us being truly puppets, and God controls every one of our moves or who gives us complete free will, and then there are consequences to our actions."

But E. Calvin Beisner of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, another Christian group, said Hescoc's argument misses the point.

"A biblical faith tells us that the Earth is the effect of an omniscient designer, and therefore we should not anticipate that it's going to be an extremely fragile system that can be knocked into catastrophe by miniscule changes in that system," he said.

The post-Industrial Revolution increase in atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions is tiny, compared with pre-historic levels, he said.

Beisner said that while human emissions might have a small impact on global temperature, both his religious worldview and his understanding of the current state of science raised many doubts about a scenario under which human activity could create sweeping changes leading to famine and flood.

"It's not consistent with the understanding that Earth is the product of a wise creator's design to think that way," he said.

Beisner said he was primarily concerned with the welfare of poor people around the globe as well but that efforts to cut down on carbon-based fuels would actually hurt them by making energy less affordable and available.

"We actually do more harm by attempting to fight global warming -- to mitigate it -- than we do by continuing to use the most reliable and affordable energy sources," he said.

Some Catholics also disputed the validity of the Vatican report, which was conducted under the auspices of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the scientific arm at the Catholic church headquarters.

"This is not a scientific report, it's an advocacy piece," said Donna Bethell, an undersecretary of Energy during the George H.W. Bush administration who now serves on the board of

Chistendom College, a Catholic college in Virginia.

Bethell said the Vatican is right to support scientific research but said the report offered no new scientific findings. Furthermore, she disagreed with the report's assertion that the environmental and health consequences of climate change would be felt primarily by "those 'bottom 3 billion' people who are too poor to avail of the protections made possible by fossil fuel use and industrialization."

But Bethell agreed with Beisner that poorer parts of the world would suffer most from actions aimed at limiting fossil-fuels consumption, because it would inhibit their economic growth. She recalled making that argument in the late 1980s, when DOE and other federal agencies began to discuss ways to mitigate the causes of climate change at home and abroad.

"What you are proposing is just flatly immoral," she said. "You are telling a third of the world that the pie is empty -- there isn't anything for them."

Christians are not the only ones who feel called by their faith to take a position on climate change, or to push lawmakers to act on that position.

The National Religious Coalition on Creation Care, which Thursday offered U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson an award for her agency's work in regulating heat-trapping emissions, includes Muslims, Jews, Protestants and Catholics among its members.

Sybil Sanchez, director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, said environmental stewardship fits naturally into the Jewish faith, with its strong emphasis on interconnectedness and community.

"Civic engagement is embedded within Jewish life and with it the awareness of one's own actions and one's own responsibilities, also embedded within Jewish life," Sanchez said.

Sanchez added that beyond concerns about climate change, many Jews are interested in reducing petroleum consumption, because the international oil market helps to prop up repressive and often unfriendly governments in the Middle East.

"It's about Israel, but it's also about the national security of the United States, it's also about not wanting to support dictators," she said. "It's all wrapped up together."

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