

# GLOBAL WARMING AND RELIGIOUS STICK FIGHTING

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Global warming has received a spate of media and popular attention recently. News clips and television programs tug at our hearts by showing polar bears stranded on plazas of ice, hopelessly peering at us as we helplessly peer back. And icebergs, millions of years old, are shown “calving” huge chunks of themselves into the warming waters tracing their shrinking contours. “Calving” has even become something of an entertainment spectacle and a tourist attraction. I have heard about some cruise lines that entice customers with the promise of witnessing the melting icebergs.

Al Gore’s thoughtful documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has also generated an upsurge of global warming awareness. Gore’s movie was released in May 2006, ranked as the US’s third highest grossing documentary in January 2007, and won an Oscar in February. Gore and his team have also collaborated with citizens from all around the country by providing them with basic training to take a slide-show version of *An Inconvenient Truth* on the road, providing occasions not only for information dissemination but genuine conversation.

And most recently, on February 2, the United Nations’ International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a document confirming that the fact of global warming is “unequivocal” and that recent climate change is “very likely”

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caused by the increase of human-based carbon emissions. The document states that, "Global atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide [generated by fossil fuel consumption], methane and nitrous oxide [due to agriculture] have increased markedly as a result of human activities since 1750 and now far exceed pre-industrial values determined from ice cores spanning many thousands of years."<sup>1</sup>

On a constructive note, the IPCC's report suggest that global warming can be curbed if significant measures are taken to reduce our carbon footprint. Very few specific recommendations were offered by the IPCC, however, regarding how to mobilize such change.

This is in keeping with the suggestion made recently by my colleague Dr. Ray Pierrehumbert, a University of Chicago geophysical scientist and member of the IPCC.<sup>2</sup> According to Pierrehumbert, the primary task of climatologists is to describe what is happening with the global climate, not to prescribe what ought to be done in response. In suggesting this he was not implying that IPCC scientists are not morally motivated to take action in response to climate change. He is himself deeply committed morally to doing all that he can as a scholar and citizen for the good of the planet. He is even known for handing out compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFL's) to the audiences he meets with all around the world in order partially to offset the carbon output resulting from the numerous hours he spends flying.

So Pierrehumbert's intention, as I understood it, was to underline the broad public nature of the moral burden that global warming presents to us. Effective response to global warming needs to be wholesale rather than incremental. In other words, while technological innovation and policy and legislation will certainly be necessary to curb carbon emissions, this is not sufficient to the problem.

Each of us as a citizen of this planet needs to begin to make changes, quite literally, from the ground up. For global warming is about how we live our lives every day here and now, and how we live our lives here and now will shape the conditions of life long into the future. To the extent that this is the case, climate scientists such as Pierrehumbert have presented the facts to the world, and left it up to the world to decide what morally to do in the face of them. While few of us are expert climatologists, most of us are expert consumers, each of us is a moral creature, and we all need to begin to think morally about our everyday carbon consumption.

But in spite of this, the media and our public culture more generally have

given relatively little attention to the ethical and religious implications of climate change. Part of this is due to global warming's seemingly inhuman proportions as moral problem. The scale of the problem is daunting, to say the least. What can any of us do, wherever we happen to be, to slow the melting of glaciers? What actions can we as finite creatures take to curb, if not undo, the climactic changes being pictured by the climate specialists?

These types of questions paralyze many of us in our effort to understand what morally we can do to respond to global warming. And yet it is also a question that occludes one of the most significant claims being made by climatologists: we mere mortal, finite creatures are "very likely" a major cause of the present acceleration of global warming! And if so, we must be courageous and wise enough not to despair in the face of the climate crisis, awesome as it is. We have set it into motion and are now responsible for doing something about it. With this in mind, I want to make the case that global warming should be understood as an issue of religious concern for the significant masses of the world's faithful. While it may be true that accelerated warming can only be curbed through very significant changes, the problem of scale, which is part of what makes responding morally to global warming so difficult, is native to religious conceptions of the moral life.

I'll lay my cards out on the table. The problem of global warming reflects a problem in the soul of our culture. Really doing something about it—that is, not simply responding incrementally, but getting to the root of the problem—requires understanding the ways in which both the soul of culture and global warming are issues of fundamental religious concern. But understanding and responding to these problems as religious concerns requires that we who are religious enact a more "worldly" religiosity.

It important to consider at the outset what it means for anything, let alone for global warming, to be an issue of "religious" concern. As readers of this journal well know, this is no simple question. Answering it presumes that we know something about the meanings of the categories "religion" and "religious." I'm going to avoid analyzing this and that scholarly perspective and offer instead a more indirect and picturesque route.

I have recently been intrigued by the writings of French philosopher of science Michel Serres. Serres is a fine, poetic stylist as well as a brilliant philosopher. In one of his books, *Natural Contract*, he opens with some reflections on the Spanish artist Francisco Jose de Goya's painting, "Men Fighting with Sticks." In this painting, Goya depicts two men standing in a pool of quicksand battling

each other with sticks. Imagine this with me and along with Serres:

A pair of enemies brandishing sticks is fighting in the midst of a patch of quicksand. Attentive to the other's tactics, each answers blow for blow, counterattacking and dodging. Outside the painting's frame, we spectators observe the [magnificent] symmetry of their gestures . . . [But] Goya has plunged the duelists knee-deep in the mud. With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don't notice the abyss they're rushing into; from outside, however, we see it clearly.<sup>3</sup>

Now, what does this have to do with "religious" concern?

As mentioned, Serres' description of this painting occurs in his book *Natural Contract*, a deep philosophical meditation on the present state of the planet. It is not a book that would be categorized as "religious." But Serres' appreciation for Goya's painting illustrates, I think, a way of understanding concerns that can be described as "religious." Fully appreciating Goya's painting requires taking a posture toward it that is analogous to a religious posture toward life. Like a religious life, scale and perspective are central to an appreciation for the painting.

First, really seeing the painting entails taking in the whole of it—not simply the men fighting with sticks, but the men fighting with sticks in the pool of quicksand, sinking more quickly with every instant that they fail to recognize their real situation.

Second, as Serres' interpretation suggests, appreciating the painting likely leads us to ask a question that is on a different order of magnitude in comparison to the one that we can imagine the men asking themselves. That is, while the men might be asking, "Who will win?" we are likely to be asking, "Who will die?"

And third, reflection on the first two questions leads us to recognize the futility of the competition at its center, a futility brought into relief by our perspective on the true urgency of the context. What ultimately matters, we see, is not who will win, or what might have brought the men to the point of battle, but whether either of them will survive.

Last, and most importantly, understanding the painting leads us to question

ourselves and our own lives and battles. Fully appreciating the painting, in other words, allows the painting to begin to question us. In viewing the painting, I was led to ask myself, as you may be asking yourselves, “What is it that blinds me to what ultimately matters, what blinds me to what is of most pressing significance in life, and what makes me susceptible to such blindness about such grave matters?”

In a way quite like the way in which an appreciation for Goya’s painting allows it to question us, so also a religious posture in life is not one in which all life’s questions are answered, but one in which life itself becomes questioned. This is the inverse of the way too many of us think about religious life. And yet religions, in addition to everything else they may be, are fundamentally interrogative.

One way to understand a concern as “religious,” then, is to understand such a concern as one that puts radical questions to life — questions that concern life’s meanings and purposes in reference to life’s foreground, background, and distant horizon, questions that evoke the true fragility and contingency of life. And this is the result of the idea that a religious posture in life is one that attempts to see life in its largest possible context. In so doing it relativizes many of our life projects by resituating them within horizons of ultimate significance, calling our commitments and our own lives into question. A religious life is a life that becomes reoriented through recognition of the scale of the question of life rather than the depth of the question and the depth of our answerability for it.

Now, with this account of “religious” concern, should global warming be understood as a “religious” concern for people of faith?

In response, YES!, and for at least two kinds of reasons.

First, global warming should be understood as an issue of religious concern because it is functionally equivalent to “religious concern” as I have illustrated the meaning of this expression. As with concern regarding the nature and reality of the Holy, as with concern about one’s relation to divine things, to God, to the sacred, as with concern for what may be one’s ultimate purposes in life, global warming puts radically reorienting questions to life. Global warming puts life itself into question—not only our own individual lives, or the lifeline of our species, but all of life and its future possibilities. Global warming evokes the fragility of life and its mysterious contingency and begs caring response on our part.

In addition to this, global warming should be a religious concern for people

of faith because, alongside the important differences among the world's faith traditions, the compasses of most religious ways share some similar orientations. Religious traditions are commonly oriented toward concern for the most vulnerable among the living, appreciation for the basic goodness of life and our human responsibilities for this goodness, aspiration to the just life or the life of holiness, and concern for the meanings and purposes of life within the largest possible frames of significance. Global warming, by posing the threats to present and future life that it does, by magnifying the real immediacy of life's precariousness, is an issue that is included directly or indirectly within each of these concerns.

As an illustration, think through some of the ecological applications of the central concerns of Christian moral life—to love God and neighbor, and especially the poor. In a time of global climate change, what is required of us if we are committed to these Christian moral principles?

Consider these facts. Approximately eighty percent of global carbon emissions are generated by the richest twenty percent of the global population. But the brunt of the impact of global warming, its most immediate and intense effects, will literally be “weathered” by the poorest eighty percent. The majority of the world's poor lives in disaster prone areas, coastal and island regions. Because their economic and everyday material lives tend to be tied very closely to the resource base, the poor global majority will be the most immediately and devastatingly impacted.

In light of this, commitment to the double love command and to concern for the poor should compel Christians to understand global warming as a profound religious concern. But fully making the case that global warming should be a religious concern requires more than providing an illustration or a justificatory rationale. For this kind of case is ultimately about the ways we live our lives as religious people. Even more urgent than the task of showing that global warming should be an issue of religious concern is the question of the extent to which it is or can be such a concern in actuality.

The good news is that for some religious people global warming is an issue of profound religious concern.<sup>4</sup> The bad news is that it is not for most others, and this is in some measure related to the fact that very little attention is granted to the religious implications of global warming in the media and our broader public culture. The good news is that religious scholars and religious activists are at work on global warming and broader environmental issues, but the bad news is that this work is not getting much publicity and thus is not getting deep-

er traction among the religious.

This paucity of attention to the religious implications of global warming is bad news for at least two important reasons. First, it indicates some deep problems in our cultural soul. And second, and most importantly for the purposes of this essay, it points to some deep problems in the way most of us who identify as religious actually transact our religious lives.

With respect to the first issue, it is helpful to understand the public culture as the sphere of talking and thinking about things that matter. In our country, the things that matter and that are given public attention are democratically determined. And so, at least in principle, the public culture includes the multiplicity of concerns of those who participate in it. The subjects that dominate will reflect the character of the majority of the people that constitute it, (or, more cynically, the character of those with the loudest “voices”). In this sense, the public culture is a register of the moral concerns of a democratic society, or as I put this above, our cultural soul.

We can learn something about our public culture not only by listening to what is being talked about within it, but also to what is missing from it. While news about the religions and religious life saturates our media spaces, most of this orbits around either conflict among religious cultures or rivaling stances on social morality and policy concerns. In other words, our public culture is fascinated with inter- and intra-religious “stick fighting.” The lack of attention to religious work on global warming or to religiously motivated environmentalism reveals the constricted nature of the soul of our public culture, but also a problem within our ways of being religious.

It is easy as a religious environmentalist to think that the lack of attention given in the public culture to religious work on global warming is the fault of the media. But it is more the fault of the religious among us than anyone else. The constricted soul of our public square, a constriction that impedes the mobilization of a more significant response to global warming, is shaped by the ways in which we who are religious live and represent the religious life.

We who are religious aid and abet the constriction of our public culture’s soul, we corroborate in the narrowing of its (and our) moral concern. Our ways of being religious are infected with the same self-interested consumerist contagion that sources global warming and that militates against the radically other-regarding moral work that our time of life’s vulnerability calls us toward. What the planet and what our public culture needs is an infusion of a more “worldly” understanding and practice of being religious.

The religious among us need to demonstrate that being religious is not a strictly private affair, but ought to have public bearing. Being religious should not be about ornamenting our lifestyles with token issues, but about the whole of our lives. Which cars we drive and how often we drive them, what we eat and where it comes from, which kinds of light bulbs we use, which legislation we support, the issues we talk about and make important in our homes and in our workplaces, all of these seemingly mundane things and more are genuinely religious issues. And most of all, we who are religious need to illumine global warming as the problem that it truly is, a problem of culture and soul, a fundamentally religious problem and not more narrowly a problem for some religionists who happen already to be environmentalists.

In short, as religionists we need to be more prophetically religious, religious in more genuinely “worldly” ways, in ways that can get traction in our public culture but that at the same time critically stand against our culture’s most destructive habits of thinking, being, and doing. We need to be religious in ways that understand and take action against the horror of fighting with sticks at a time in which all of life is sinking into the quicksand of global warming.

I want to conclude with a quotation from Hans Jonas, a Jewish philosopher from whom I have learned a great deal about the environmental burdens of religious life:

It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation—from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of Buddha)—is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation.<sup>5</sup>

This is what I take to be the crucial point. Just as religious concerns are ones that put radical questions to life, so now global warming is putting radical questions to the religions. How will we who are religious answer?



## Notes

1. IPCC Working Group I, Fourth Assessment Report, "Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis: Summary for Policymakers," downloaded 8 February 2007, [http://ipcc-wg1.ucar.edu/wg1/docs/WG1AR4\\_SPM\\_Approved\\_05Feb.pdf](http://ipcc-wg1.ucar.edu/wg1/docs/WG1AR4_SPM_Approved_05Feb.pdf).
2. Dr. Pierrehumbert was a lead author of the IPCC's Third Assessment Report issued in 2001. Information about his work and about global warming for nonscientists can be accessed at <http://www.realclimate.org>. The public lecture from which this article originated was presented in collaboration with him.
3. Michel Serres, *Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995), 1.
4. Philosopher Roger Gottlieb's recent book provides a helpful tour through some of the general patterns in environmentally motivated religious scholarship as well as discussing an array of faith-based environmental activism groups. See *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2006).
5. Hans Jonas, "Epilogue: The Outcry of Mute Things," *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996) 201–202.