

Where Conversations Happen and Values Emerge

What spurs religious action on climate change?
The answer lies more in dialogue than in doctrine.

In the weeks before the 2021 COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, religious leaders including Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby issued a statement arguing that faith communities have moral and theological reasons—what they call a “spiritual commission”—to combat climate change.

While policymakers and scientists welcomed the acknowledgment, decades of climate-related faith statements have had little concrete impact in the policy realm. As the global community continues to wrestle with how to implement an adequate and meaningful response to climate change, how can we better understand what religion can—and cannot—offer the climate conversation?

As scholars who study how faith commitments influence environmental attitudes and behaviors, we suggest conceptualizing religion as fluid, dynamic, and embodied: *religions are places where conversations happen and values emerge*. Seeing religions in this way, rather than as a set of reified beliefs or rituals, reframes the question of how society finds solutions for complex environmental problems. Addressing climate change is a social concern as much as, if not more than, a scientific or technical one, and the fluid nature of religions is fundamental to this social and moral world.

To see the way this fluid model plays out, consider how Catholics have responded to Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*, released in 2015. The encyclical promotes a theologically-inspired critique of consumerism, technology, and environmental degradation. In the popular press, the encyclical was presented as a “Catholic understanding” of

climate change—as though it offered clear, basic teachings that instruct (or, more forcefully, command) believers to value the environment. But if such a claim were true, the global Catholic Church and its 1.4 billion members could fairly easily have translated the document into behavior changes, with the encyclical’s reference to terms such as “stewardship” and “concern for God’s creation” inspiring Catholics around the world to embrace carbon-friendly lifestyle changes.

Of course, in the real world, what happened was much messier. It was also more revealing, both of religion and of the climate issue itself. The encyclical was widely and eagerly praised as paving the way for Catholics around the globe to join the climate movement. When it was issued by the Vatican, it was promoted enthusiastically: given that the encyclical was addressed to “all people of good will,” it was introduced in front of the US Congress, the United Nations, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as a statement that transcended any one religious community. Because it was a theological document that symbolized the position of an institutionalized faith and authority, it was also expected to change how Catholics thought and acted.

The profound impact *Laudato Si’* has had on discussions among environmental ethicists and scientists alike is partly due to the expectation that the encyclical spoke “for Catholics” and Catholicism. For scholars who study climate using normative lenses such as theology and ethics, the encyclical illuminated the inner workings of how a particular faith community can reflect on the relationship between faith, knowledge, institutional authority, and justice in the contemporary world. The

scientific community readily gravitated toward *Laudato Si'* because it was authored with an intentional recognition of just how important science is in understanding our planet. This overture to the scientific community was noted: at the time of the encyclical's release, Marcia McNutt (former editor of *Science* and current president of the National Academy of Sciences) wrote that Pope Francis had become "our most visible champion for mitigating climate change."

A complex reception

Yet in the six years since it was released, researchers studying the response to *Laudato Si'* have documented a far more complex response within local and regional Catholic communities themselves. In the United States, a study of the Diocese of Syracuse, New York, found that few clergy had taken concrete actions in light of *Laudato Si'*, citing numerous personal and systemic barriers—including fear of pushback from the very parishioners for whom and to whom *Laudato Si'* was supposed to speak.

An ethnographic study of Latinx Catholics in Los Angeles found that many believed that their love of God required them to care for creation. However, these same participants critiqued what they called "ecological groups," established in some Catholic dioceses in the wake of *Laudato Si'*, as insincere because they were motivated primarily by ecological rather than religious concerns.

And an anthropological study of Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics in Guatemala found not only that climate change was an issue at the top of many people's minds there, but that clergy leaders were actively using *Laudato Si'* to help educate local residents on their responsibilities toward the environment.

In other words, rather than all Catholics taking the encyclical as a mandate, some communities ignored it, some were already in agreement (for religious rather than specifically environmental reasons), and others were galvanized to act. This means that the release of *Laudato Si'* became an occasion for conversation—something that seems reinforced by the Catholic Church's recent announcement of the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform initiative, which encourages communities to move the conversation toward actions. Rather than forcing the community to quickly align with a theological position, the encyclical's release prompted local and regional communities to interpret the importance of climate in their own lives. *Laudato Si'* is a pivotal document precisely because it creates an occasion, not a conclusion, for conversations around climate ethics.

Religion scholars have explored the complex ways individuals and groups connect faith to environmental activism. As with *Laudato Si'*, they have found that the work of religion can be described as much through words like "dialogue," "experience," and "engagement" as it can through "beliefs" and "doctrine." This scholarship provides insights for scientists, policymakers, and environmental advocates

on how to engage in these discussions without making presumptions about belief systems dictating adherence to doctrines. In fact, the religious discussion of climate, like climate change itself, is a global phenomenon that takes wildly divergent local and individual forms.

Pastor Bob's climate conversion

An anecdote from fieldwork that one of us (Veldman) conducted further illustrates the individualized ways that abstract religious doctrines translate to the values adherents hold in real life. During 14 months of fieldwork in 2011–2012 among evangelicals in Georgia from historically white denominations, I got to know a family that belonged to a conservative Baptist denomination.

The first member of the family that I met was Bob (all names in this section are pseudonyms), the patriarch of the family and pastor of a small rural church. Most of the evangelicals I had met up until that point had expressed doubt that the climate was changing due to human causes and were suspicious of climate scientists and climate activists. There were consistent themes across rural, suburban, and urban informants: climate scientists were after grant money, and environmentalists were "crazy people." But Bob was different. I was surprised to learn during my initial interview with him that he believed climate change was caused by human activities and thought climate change was something Christians should be concerned about. Regarding other social and political matters, Bob was conservative. During one Sunday service, for example, he attributed the "mess in Washington" to the country turning away from God. Later, in a discussion of family dynamics, he asserted that it was men's duty to lead, women's duty to submit, and children's duty to obey.

If religion is viewed as simply a litany of beliefs, there is no mechanism for explaining why Bob's environmental views should differ so much from evangelical counterparts who shared his theological commitments.

Only after spending several months with the pastor, his family, and his church did I start to understand how he had come to think climate change was a real and serious problem. The story rests on the way that theological reflection develops within and among members of the faith community through conversations and relationships. The first step to piecing together the puzzle came when I met Bob's daughter and son-in-law, Alyssa and Justin, through a focus group at Bob's church. In the focus group, Alyssa and Justin made quite an impression, defending the reality of climate change and climate science, at times even verbally sparring with other participants. At the end, they recommended in passing that I get in touch with a woman named Jill. Justin did not state his relationship with Jill, but I was impressed—I wrote in my field notes that Justin had "rattled off two phone numbers for her *from memory*."

Once I had a chance to meet Jill, Alyssa and Justin's convictions began to make sense. Jill was an ardent and articulate environmentalist with a longstanding interest in environmental issues as a result of observing disputes between loggers and spotted owl advocacy groups while growing up in Oregon. She was working toward a graduate degree in environmental education in Georgia while teaching in the local high school, where she met Alyssa and Justin nine years before. As Justin later told me, he and Alyssa initially got to know Jill by helping her with childcare and housesitting. The three became closer over the years and, when Justin's mother passed away, Jill took on a maternal role. Throughout their friendship, Jill had encouraged Justin and Alyssa to take environmental problems seriously, even though, as Jill commented, environmentalism was widely dismissed as a liberal concern by others in the rural community they lived in. It was Jill's personal relationship with Alyssa and Justin, nurtured through her deep, longtime involvement in the community as a teacher, that enabled her to overcome these considerable barriers. Ultimately, Alyssa and Justin's interest in the topic led other family members, including Bob, to rethink their positions as well.

Seeing how a family of theologically, politically, and socially conservative evangelicals came to embrace some aspects of environmentalism should be an "aha" moment for members of the evangelical community and, equally, those outside it: it is an example of how religion ends up being a dialogue that is deeply personal as well as social. Not simply a set of beliefs, religion is an exploration of values and meaning that one participates in. The examples of *Laudato Si'* and Bob's family have an underlying commonality despite their differences in scale: in both cases, religion is not something that simply commands adherence. And because this is the case, dialogue about religion and climate creates opportunities. This dialogue might sometimes be polarized, but change remains possible. The conversations within religious communities continue to evolve.

A more nuanced role for religion

Since religion is an opportunity for conversation, we also think that religious studies scholars (as distinct from religious practitioners themselves) have a unique contribution to make to discussions about how societies should respond to climate change. Religious studies can assist the scientific and political communities in building the connection between religion and climate in a productive way by explaining the complex and even conflicting dynamics that are occurring within religious communities and institutions. And scholars engaged in critical theological and ethical work can add to the conversation as well, helping to prevent simplistic or reductive assessments of what faith inspires people to think, feel, and do.

Religious studies scholars also bring to this discussion a keen awareness of the ways that religions themselves—are

a mixture of rituals, communities, and beliefs—are being changed by global warming. Anticipation and awareness of global-scale environmental instability is leading some religious leaders to draw on their religious traditions in new ways, by creating new rituals or by highlighting the environmental implications of certain traditional teachings. Just as climate change alters the physical world, so too is it altering the social world, including the world's religions.

We see at least three concrete ways in which embracing this more fluid, dynamic, and embodied model of religion will advance public conversations about climate change.

First, for policymakers, there is an opportunity to more realistically assess how faith communities enter or attempt to influence the climate conversation—and reasons why they might not. Such assessments should result in dropping the stereotypical one or two sentences in climate reports that acknowledge the importance of religion as an ethical force, in favor of working to include more in-depth explorations of religion as a complex social force.

Second, for scientists, dialogue with religion scholars could give a clearer picture of the ways that lived religions influence the public's understanding of climate science. Scientists might be tempted to treat religions as tools that can be used to communicate to a certain group, or as a simple group description, but more interdisciplinary engagement could lead to a deeper understanding of the value of faith in conversations about climate change. As trusted messengers, religious leaders have significant potential for leadership on climate change issues. But as we have seen with the example of Roman Catholics, the ability of faith leaders to move the needle can be limited by a variety of factors, none of which can be accurately assessed without careful study. Thus the study of religion can be vital for the communication of climate science, as well as for assessing its public impact.

And finally, for the public, the study of religion and climate is essential for showing an important dimension of something that climate and culture scholar Mike Hulme persuasively argued in *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*: climate change itself is a debate about contested values and interpretations. In much of the world, religions are the primary language of moral reflection. Religious people must be able to see themselves in conversations about climate change. In the absence of discussion of religion and religious values in relation to climate change, many of them will not.

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