

EARTH'S CLIMATE EMBRACES US ALL

A PLEA FROM RELIGION AND SCIENCE FOR ACTION ON GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

We are people of religious life and people of science who travel diverse, individual paths in our search for truth. Over centuries, our communities have disagreed, sometimes contentiously, about fundamental questions of human origin, nature, and purpose.

At this critical moment in history, however, many of us share a deep conviction that global climate change presents an unprecedented threat to the integrity of life on Earth and a challenge to universal values that bind us as human beings.

Each of our two communities is seeking to contribute to a better, broader understanding of this issue and its larger meaning.

Highly regarded institutions in the international scientific community have reached a broad consensus on causes and potential consequences of climate change. Citing “discernable human influence on global climate,” the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that the current atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, the main human-made greenhouse gas affected by human activity, has not been exceeded during the past 420,000 years and likely not during the past 20 million years. According to a 2001 National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report, “Climate change simulations for the period of 1990 to 2100 based on the IPCC emissions scenarios yield a globally-averaged surface temperature increase by the end of the century of 1.4 to 5.8 C (2.5 to 10.4F) relative to 1990.... Even in the more conservative scenarios, the models project temperatures and sea levels that continue to increase well beyond the end of this century.”

Among the predicted consequences of climate change are more frequent occurrences of heat waves, drought, torrential rains, and floods; global sea level rise of between one-half and three feet; increase of tropical diseases in now-temperate regions; significant reduction in biodiversity. All these conditions would seriously affect human health and well-being. And, according to the IPCC, “the impacts of climate change will fall disproportionately upon developing countries and the poor persons within all countries, and thereby exacerbate inequities in health status and access to adequate food, clean water, and other resources.”

When “discernable human influence” is determined to be a cause of destruction, we are dealing with moral and ethical concerns as well as scientific and policy issues. For many, these are shaped by religious conviction.

For example, in Judaeo-Christian scripture, all creation, by God's handicraft, is deemed “good.” Because “the Earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof” (Psalms 24:1), its gifts are intended for the benefit of all. Humans are called into covenant with their creator as stewards of life. In love, we care for the conditions of one another's well-being; in justice we attend first to the needs of the most vulnerable. When significant danger threatens, the traditional value of prudence requires us to prevent damage to the common good. All these obligations apply to the protection of future generations.

Religion and Science may not always agree on the sources of these ideas. But such principles --- of stewardship, justice, protection of the weak, inter-generational duty, and prudence --- are universal values when responsible scientific study has identified grave risk. Global warming is a universal moral challenge.

We appreciate obstacles to addressing this problem, significantly an unintended consequence of technologies which have made possible great human progress. However, the same ingenuity that devised such benefits can redress their destructive consequences. Extensive study and debate --- in science, technology, commerce, and public policy --- have led to significant agreement about measures that would indeed slow the pace of climate change. This is a challenge we can meet.

Necessary initiatives include: continued scientific research; the further development of new, clean technologies in power generation and transportation; an energy economy with far less dependence on fossil fuels; targets and timetables for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; training and just transition into new jobs created by new technologies. The wealthier nations of the planet have a solemn moral obligation to help developing countries protect the poor in their midst as they seek to limit greenhouse gas emissions.

What is most required at this moment, however, is moral vision and leadership. Resources of human character and spirit --- love of life, far-sightedness, solidarity --- are needed to awaken a sufficient sense of urgency and resolve.

In this situation, the United States has both responsibility and opportunity. With 4% of the world's population, we have contributed 25% of the increased greenhouse gas concentration which causes global warming. Moreover, we uniquely possess technological resources, economic power, and political influence to facilitate solutions.

However, policies that devalue scientific consensus, withdraw from diplomatic initiative, and seek only voluntary initiatives do not seem to us adequate responses to this crisis. We recognize that there are other perspectives than our own. Societies and governments respond slowly to such challenges. Partisanship and acrimony have brought us no closer to solutions.

The Climate Stewardship Act now before the U.S. Senate offers a way forward and an opportunity for renewed resolve. It calls for moderate greenhouse gas reductions and provides market-based incentives to lower energy costs. In addition to its provisions, it can help raise the standard of discourse, encourage local and international initiative, and generate fresh moral resolve. While we take no position on specifics of the legislation, *we urge the leadership of the Senate to bring this measure forward and to provide sufficient time and reflective tone for debate.* We ask our senators to step back from partisanship and consider what is needed here for the common good of humankind and our planet home.

We will continue efforts to mobilize our two communities, separately and in joint initiatives. We do not have to agree on how and why the world was created in order to work together to preserve it for posterity. In this spirit, we call upon leaders in other sectors --- commerce, labor, education, government and non-governmental organizations, research and technology --- --- to join us in finding ways to communicate to their own communities the urgency of this threat to our global commons and the well-being of future generations.

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