

## Coming to Terms with our Moral Responsibility: Climate Change and the Future of Civilization

July 9, 2014

Our civilization now faces an unavoidable option: Will we choose the difficult path that leads to hope? Or will we cater to wistful, hear-no-evil dreams from which we'll awaken into a bleak dystopia? The difficult but rewarding path brings us to a richer vision of ourselves, our Creator, and creation. We'll either re-forge the bonds between morality and policy or our dreams for the future will abandon us on the rubble of a modern-day Tower of Babel.

Such a choice compels the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care to call upon U.S. policymakers to heed God's instruction in the Book of Joshua: "*Be strong and very courageous*" (Joshua 1:7). Possess the courage to walk the path of hope. Be guided by the truth and formulate policies on that basis. Make the -right choices. Denying human-induced climate change may be easy in the short term, but it is profoundly immoral.

We also urge courage upon America's sleeping giant – the 80 percent of citizens claiming religious affiliation – to awaken to their own religious teachings on climate change and their responsibilities as citizens and demand that political leaders act on a scale that is consonant with the evidence revealed by the scientific community. The United States in particular bears a special burden for leading the world on this issue because it is responsible for 26 percent of the human-caused greenhouse gas CO<sub>2</sub> that is in the atmosphere.

In the late 1970's, we received multiple warnings from major scientists, including the National Academy of Sciences, that global warming would happen if we kept burning fossil fuels and that this could lead to a loss of our coastal cities. By the mid-1990's the evidence indicated that the planet was already warming and human beings were the primary drivers of this warming. The evidence was so clear that in the first years of this century military officials warned of potential devastation and considered climate change a matter of national security.

Religious leaders began issuing appeals: "Climate change is much more than an issue of environmental protection," said Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, adding, "insofar as it is human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem."

Pope Francis recently declared: "Safeguard Creation, because if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us! Never forget this."

The Central Conference of American Rabbis said, “Together, the people of the world can, and must, use our God-given gifts to develop innovative strategies to meet the needs of all who currently dwell on this planet, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The rabbis called for “strong action” to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The National Council of Churches, representing over 40 Christian denominations, has declared, “Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been depleted; [and] coastal development and pollution are causing a decline in ocean health.... In recent years, the profound danger has grown, requiring us as theologians and religious leaders to speak out and urge action with new urgency.”

“The need to act now is urgent,” asserted dozens of Evangelical Christian leaders.

And Buddhist leaders jointly proclaimed: “The scientific consensus is overwhelming: human activity is triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale.”

Yet our decision-makers repeatedly balked, potentially paving devastation’s path. From 1951-1980, extremely hot summers occurred over less than 1% of Earth’s surface. Now, because of global warming, they occur over 10% of the land area.<sup>i</sup> This shift is responsible for over 130,000 deaths in Europe alone in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>ii</sup> Extrapolations of this data indicate that by mid-century, when children born today are in their late thirties, the global warming decadal death toll from temperature alone could be comparable to the number of deaths suffered during World War II.

Two independent scientific papers published in early May, 2014, show unnerving evidence that six glaciers on the West Antarctica ice sheet are now in a phase of unstoppable melt that will lead to a sea level rise of 1.2 meters (4 feet). Eric Rignot, a NASA scientist and co-author of one of the studies, said the melt will “likely trigger the collapse of the rest of the West Antarctic ice sheet, which comes with a sea level rise of between three and five meters [10 to 16 feet].”<sup>iii</sup> It is uncertain how long this collapse will take, but a conservative estimate is several centuries. This is in addition to the increased melting of the Greenland ice sheet, which, according to another recent study, will contribute much more to sea level rise by 2100 than previously thought.<sup>iv</sup>

A three-foot rise would ruin Charleston, New Orleans, Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, Saint Petersburg, and Miami; a sixteen-foot rise would condemn Boston and Houston and dwindle San Diego, Seattle, and New York to remnants of their former selves – and those estimates do not factor in storm surge damage, which is likely to ravage our coasts much earlier. One study suggests that a five-foot sea level rise would bring Superstorm Sandy-style surges every other year along the East Coast, putting our cities under siege.

On our current path, over 1/3 of all plant and animal species, excluding ocean species, could be "committed to extinction" by mid-century.<sup>v</sup> By the mid 2060's carbon dioxide levels will be high enough to set in motion a mass extinction of ocean ecosystems. This could bring about the Earth's 6th Mass Extinction.<sup>vi</sup> Humans cannot cope with the national and international disturbances that will occur as we destroy the food chains upon which we all depend.<sup>vii</sup>

Given the evidence, our responsibility, and the call, it is not an overstatement to bluntly label the continual denial of the evidence by some politicians and the feckless foot dragging by others as "radically evil." Either we demand that our leaders act in accord with the truth of our situation and come together in a World War II-style effort to transform our economy to run on abundant renewable energy or we will abandon our own children to pick through Babel's debris in a world of mega-droughts, floods, wild fires, and endless wars over diminishing water and food supplies.

The ancient wisdom found in our sacred texts tells us that we were never meant to conquer creation, but we are called to nurture God's earth. The conquering of creation, as is becoming all too evident, means our destruction. We are faced now with the starkest of choices as laid out by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy – "*I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live*" (Deut. 30: 19-20).

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<sup>i</sup> James Hansen, Makiko Satoa, and Reto Ruedy, "Perception of Climate Change," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Aug 6, 2012

<sup>ii</sup> Tonja Wolf, Glen McGregor, "The Development of a Heat Wave Vulnerability Index for London, United Kingdom," *Weather and Climate Extremes*, Vol. 1, September 2013, 59-68.

<sup>iii</sup> Eric Rignot, "Global warming: it's a point of no return in West Antarctica. What happens next?" *The Guardian*, May 17, 2014, accessed May 17, 2014

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/17/climate-change-antarctica-glaciers-melting-global-warming-nasa>.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Morlighem, E. Rignot, J. Mouginot, H. Seroussi, E. Larour, "Deeply incised submarine glacial valleys beneath the Greenland ice sheet," *Nature Geoscience* (2014), doi:10.1038/ngeo2167, accessed May 18, 2014  
<http://www.nature.com/ngeo/journal/v7/n6/full/ngeo2167.html>

<sup>v</sup> Thomas et al, "Extinction Risk from Climate Change, *Nature* 427, 145–148, January 8, 2004.

<sup>vi</sup> J.E.N. Veron, "The Coral Reef Crisis: The Critical Importance of <350 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>," *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 58 (2009), 1428–1436.

<sup>vii</sup> "A Call to Halt Mass Extinction", 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), <http://www.endangered.org/the-presbyterian-churchs-call-to-halt-mass-extinction/>