The Religious and Political Climate: Getting Past the Antediluvian

Dennis S Ross

The Bible’s Noah never imagined his story’s becoming a prop for global warming denial. Yet in today’s religious and political climate, Noah’s tale is the foil in Congress—a pretext for rejecting science-based climate protection.

First, let’s agree that global warming is happening right now, that we are the cause and the impact is staggering. With nine of the ten hottest recorded years occurring since 2001 (Krugman 2012) and the first six months of last year bringing the highest recorded temperatures in the contiguous United States since 1895 (The New York Times 2012), once stable polar glaciers are melting, oceans are rising, and there’s more rain and snow. Continued global warming will contribute to even higher seas, stronger hurricanes and storms, more frequent droughts, scarcer fresh water and spread of disease, like mosquito-borne malaria (National Geographic Society 2012a).

Global warming is one consequence of the accumulation of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels in cars, factories, and power plants along with other gases that combine with methane from agriculture and landfills, along with additional gases from refrigeration and industrial processes (National Geographic Society 2102b). In the midst of this grim environmental reality, climate change deniers unfortunately capture much attention and sway, to the point of undermining attempts to protect the earth. At the same time, a religious theme behind their science-denial is often overlooked. Let’s consider this negative religious approach.

For instance, US Senator James Inhofe (R–OK) said:

“It’s not whether or not we’re going through a global warming period. We were. We’re not now. You know God’s still up there. We’re now going through a cooling spell. And the whole issue there was, is it man-made gases, anthropogenic gases, CO₂, methane. I don’t think so.” (Stoll 2009)

In other words, even if the earth is getting warmer, no need for us to worry. “You know God’s still up there,” as if tinkering with some heavenly thermostat to get us to Goldilocks’s ideal temperature: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. Inhofe went deeper in his recent book, The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future (Inhofe 2012), relying on the Bible’s story of the Great Flood to support this science denial, as do others.

Recalling Noah’s tale (Genesis 6:9 to 9:29), God decided to destroy a corrupt and lawless humanity—all except for righteous Noah. God told Noah about the upcoming Flood and
instructed Noah to build an ark to save himself, his family, and animals. The rains came and the world flooded. After the rain ended, the water subsided and the land dried, the ark’s inhabitants—human and animal—set off to repopulate the earth. God placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of a promise—a Covenant—never to destroy people like that again. Inhofe refers to Genesis 8:22:

As long as the earth remains
there will be springtime and harvest,
cold and heat, winter and summer,
day and night.

The senator concludes, “He [God] promised to maintain the seasons and that cold and heat would never cease as long as the earth remains” (2012:71), as if the planet will always be there for us, as is, no matter how hot we make it or how much we foul it. This line of thought goes way beyond the Bible’s intention; God made no such promise. Of note, former presidential candidate and former senator Rick Santorum (Kapur 2012) and Representative John Shimkus (R–IL) (Daily Mail 2010) have offered similar science-denying arguments.

The Bow Set in the Clouds

It’s tempting to ignore the rhetoric as naive, ignorant, or silly—but that would be a dangerous mistake. These science deniers have achieved high national office, which confers the power to maintain bad policies and defeat or delay the implementation of good ones. For example, Inhofe is ranking minority member of the US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and serves on the Subcommittee on Clean Air, Climate Change, and Nuclear Safety (Inhofe nd). Shimkus serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and chairs the Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy (Shimkus 2012). And former senator Santorum may yet have a long and successful political career. This is all to say that policy makers charged with protecting the climate are instead using their positions to codify personal religious beliefs that would both violate church–state separation and undermine the stability of the environment that hosts us all.

In response, let’s begin by pointing out that many, many religious leaders respect scientific consensus. Religious global warming deniers speak as if they are the sole and authentic voice of faith, but they are neither. The reality is that people from a wide spectrum of religions and denominations are proud to reconcile science and religion—and they are among the most effective counter voices. When the opposition is religious, the proper respondent is a religious respondent. When one faith says Noah’s story teaches us not to worry about global warming and another faith strongly disagrees, we have appropriately re-framed this debate as a religious quarrel that policymakers have no business entering to play umpire, decide which religion is correct, establish that faith as the winner, and enshrine those faith teachings as law. Rather, under church–state separation, our government must craft science-based policy. Of course, people are free to interpret the Bible as they wish and hold these religious beliefs in the home, the heart, or their houses of prayer. And they are free to express those beliefs in the public forum and with policy makers—it’s the American way. But it’s not the American way for Congress or state legislatures to push science aside on the assumption that if we hit a problem, God will save us.
Let’s also recognize the proper place for faith. I often hear it said that religious people should stick to religion and keep away from policy. The reality is that religious expression is perfectly legal—government regulations provide for limited advocacy by religious leaders and institutions (Internal Revenue Service 2009). In addition, every American has a right—really responsibility—to voice an opinion; I don’t lose my freedom to speak just because I am a rabbi. Even as we honor the boundaries between religion and government, there is a positive and appropriate role for religious voices in public life. What’s more, religious people are here to stay—those of us who respect science and those who don’t. There’s wisdom in learning how to deal with organized religion, because we are not going away.

It is important to recognize the big differences among religious advocates. Typically, religious climate change and science deniers cite their faith’s teachings as the final word, expecting policy makers to enact legislation just because their religion says so. In contrast, I believe that religious arguments—mine or anyone else’s—are never the final word in crafting policy. Religious perspectives are just one factor among many, including the US Constitution and, in this case, science. Religion does have a voice, and religious people are among the most effective spokespersons when it comes to clarifying the appropriate, but limited, role of faith in public life.

**Called to stewardship**

We don’t have to go very far to deepen and strengthen working partnerships between the science community and like-minded religious groups. For instance, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment is an alliance of faith groups—the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches of Christ (which includes many “mainline” Protestant denominations, and churches in the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox and African American traditions), and the Evangelical Environmental Network. The members all recognize the reality and dangers of global warming. The Partnership is a great example of the wide spectrum of religious leaders and people of faith who love the Bible and respect science, all at the same time.

The Partnership’s mission statement affirms a nuanced biblical, theological and religious argument:

Called to be the Creator’s special stewards, human beings have a unique responsibility for the rest of creation. As wise stewards, we are summoned not only to mold creation’s bounty into complex civilizations of justice and beauty, but also to sustain creation’s fruitfulness and preserve its powerful testimony to its Creator.

We confess that too often we have perverted our stewardly calling, rampaging destructively through creation rather than offering creation and civilization back in praise to the Creator. For this our sin, we repent, gratefully acknowledging that the Creator is also the Redeemer who promises to renew all things. In grateful obedience to this our marvelous God, we resolve to make our homes, our faith communities and our societies centers for creation’s care and renewal, healing the damaged fabric of the creation which God entrusted to us. (National Religious Partnership for the Environment 2013)
The Partnership represents many millions of faithful—religious folks from diverse denominations and communities across the nation—who lovingly reconcile religious teaching and scientific finding about earth care.

The word “stewardship” is central to a proper religious and spiritual relationship to the earth. The Creation story places Adam and Eve—representing all humanity—in charge, and includes earth care as a fundamental human responsibility. A Covenant of climate stewardship speaks to the spiritual, religious and moral responsibility for earth. In plain language, our faiths teach that we made this mess, that we are making it worse, and that it is up to us to fix it: the onus is on us.

The seas rose in Noah’s time and they rise again today, although at a much slower rate that, we hope, leaves time to act. Building a wooden ark won’t save us. But we can make an ark of our earth with policies that protect our environment, so that we, our earth and all that live on it, will endure.

References


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