

How the world's religions are responding to climate change: social scientific investigations

Foreword

The rhythms of the sky have long been companions of human thought and ritual. From the frigid north to the torrid tropics they have induced wonder and fear, whilst also offering comfort and poise. Alongside intensely predictable diurnal and seasonal weather cycles, has also existed the unreliable and unfeeling performance of climate from year-to-year and from generation-to-generation. A mere dry season is not a drought; and winter is not an ice age. It is little wonder then that human anxieties and hopes – and hence many of our spiritual longings – have been bound up with the skies. Religions have found many ways to make sense of these cruel fates, acknowledging our dependence on powers beyond our control and giving thanks for mercies and blessings received. Climate and religion have a long history of co-dependency.

And so it is somewhat surprising that the last 25 years have witnessed such a wilful exclusion of religions, and the religious, in the forging of modernist accounts of climate change and its multiple causes. I am thinking here especially of the United Nations expert body -- the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) -- which formed in 1988. The IPCC has managed to prize the idea of climate and its capricious behaviour away from its deep cultural anchors. But the erasure in Western science of religious sentiment from accounts of climate and what it means to human beings can be traced much further back.

In recent years this has begun to change. As the scientised account of climate change and human agency has spread around the world it has run up against deeper narratives and stronger resistance than many scientists -- and politicians and campaigners -- might have thought. Climate change turns out to be not just one thing, a thing defined and simulated inside Earth System models. The meanings of climate change are multiple and the ways in which human beings express, represent, engage and resist climate change are too numerous to be controlled by a single hegemon. And many of these reactions have their roots in ancient religious doctrines, traditions and practices.

The scholarly community, dominated as it has by the secularised cultures of Western Europe and some Anglophone countries, has slowly awakened to this reality. Europe is becoming a post-secular society, even as much of the rest of the world remains faith-based. Climate change needs to be studied not just by meteorologists, ecologists and economists, but by sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers. The IPCC has offered a one-dimensional account of climate change. As many commentators have remarked, cultural innovation and effective climate policy need to tap into intrinsic, deeply held values and motives. As the Alliance of Religions and Conservation observed in 2007: "The emphasis on consumption, economics and policy usually fails to engage people at any deep level because it does not address the narrative, the mythological, the metaphorical or the existence of memories of

past disasters and the way out. The faiths are the holders of these areas and without them, policies will have very few real roots.”

It is in this context that the editors of this new volume -- *How the World's Religions are Responding to Climate Change: Social Scientific Investigations* -- have done a great service. As sociologists of religion they have taken these two things seriously -- climate change and religion -- and through this collection of studies brought into view the many different ways in which they interact in different settings. This collection of empirical studies encompasses Bangladesh, Bhutan, Canada, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Solomon Islands, UK, Uruguay and the USA.

Why then does religion matter for understanding climate change? The various authors emphasise the importance of religions in giving substance and power to social norms, social capital, lifestyle patterns, creation care and human dignity. And then there is simply the brute reality of the political power of religious institutions in the world! Arresting climate change is not just beyond science -- it is also beyond the state. Religious movements and institutions, as has been found with businesses, cities and NGOs, have the mobilising power to enlist and de-list multitudes of citizens in causes of of what? Well, whatever causes are invigorated by the idea of anthropogenic climate change; as this volume shows there is no single authorised response to climate change.

This diversity is well captured in the 17 contributions to this book, which embrace Buddhism, several variants of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, alongside traditional indigenous beliefs and practices. Captured in these case studies are the religious filters that sift through scientific evidence and rhetoric to yield resonant interpretations and perceptions of climate change. Captured here are the religious social movements which inspire transforming behaviours and political activism. Captured here are the different institutional forms of religious practices as they engage and support the environmental poor. And captured here too are some of the multiple forms of public reasoning which yield epistemological and ethical underpinnings for all the above. Far from inspiring a replicable or universal response, the world's religions are engaging the idea of climate change for a diversity of reasons.

Science is never quite enough; neither in its promise of solid and reliable knowledge, nor in its efforts to animate social movements and resolve political contestation. Reading climate change and human agency through the eyes of the world's religions offers new insights and inspirations about what it means to be human in an age of climate change. And this volume offers both.

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