

Global Warming, God, and American Complacency

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The headline of a 2013 *Washington Post* article said, “Americans Are Less Worried about Climate Change than Almost Anyone Else.” According to a Pew poll of that year, only 33% of the American public consider global warming a “very serious” problem, and only 28% think that it should be a “top priority” for the politicians in Washington. Of the 21 issues tested, moreover, global warming was at the bottom of the priority list.²

1. Supernaturalism and Climate Complacency

One of the main reasons for this attitude is theism – not simply theism understood broadly as “belief in God,” but belief in a particular conception of God, which is shared by a large number of Americans. Belief in God in this sense is exemplified by many of our political leaders in Washington.

For example, in a book called *The Greatest Hoax*, Republican Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma explained why people should not be worried about climate change by citing Genesis 8:22 – “As long as the earth remains there will be seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night.” Saying that this passage shows that God promised long ago that “cold and heat should not cease,” Inhofe said: “This is what a lot of alarmists forget. God is still up there, and He promised to maintain the seasons.” It is arrogant, said Inhofe, to “think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate.”³

Likewise, Republican Congressman John Shimkus of Illinois, using the same verse from Genesis, said: “I believe that’s the infallible word of God, and that’s the way it’s going to be for his creation. . . . The Earth will end only when God declares it’s time to be over.”⁴

In the same vein, talk-show host Rush Limbaugh took issue with Secretary of State John Kerry’s statement that climate change is “a challenge to our responsibilities as the guardians . . . of God’s creation.” Limbaugh replied: “If you believe in God, then intellectually you cannot believe in manmade global warming.” To worry about human-caused global warming, Limbaugh said, is to imply that “we are so . . . omnipotent that we can . . . destroy the climate.”⁵

To believe in God, according to these three men, is to believe that the world is under the complete control of an omnipotent deity. The traditional doctrine of divine omnipotence is the idea that God can unilaterally bring about *anything* (except perhaps for logical impossibilities – God cannot create round squares). Nothing can come about, therefore, unless God causes or at least permits it.

This conception of the world is called “supernaturalism,” because God is said not to be

limited by the world's natural laws. God may allow the world generally to run according to the natural laws – such as the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology – but God can at will interrupt or override them.

This worldview has been stated with special clarity by Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson, who says that his faith community “operates with a definite supernaturalism – God resides outside the world and intervenes periodically within the natural processes through miracles.” Nature, Erickson says, “is under God’s control; and while it ordinarily functions in uniform and predictable ways in obedience to the laws he has structured into it, he can and does also act within it in ways which contravene these normal patterns (miracles).”⁶

This supernaturalistic worldview is exemplified by Calvin Beisner, the spokesman for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, which put out an “Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming,” which says: “Earth and its ecosystems – created by God’s intelligent design and infinite power and sustained by His faithful providence – are robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting.”⁷ In other words, the world is in the hands of a good and omnipotent deity, so we need not worry about global warming.

Holding that the great threat to civilization is not global warming but environmentalism, Beisner says that, in light of the omnipotence, omniscience, and faithfulness of God, to believe that global warming could lead to catastrophe would be “an insult to God.”⁸

One common feature of Christian supernaturalism is belief in “the Second Coming of Jesus Christ,” according to which Jesus will return at the end of the world. A 2013 article published in the *Political Research Quarterly* found that “believers in Christian end-times theology are less likely to support policies designed to curb global warming than are other Americans.” Whereas most other Americans “support preserving the Earth for future generations,” the “end-times believers would rationally perceive such efforts to be ultimately futile, and hence ill-advised.”⁹

Another common feature of Christian supernaturalism is the conception of extreme weather events as “acts of God.” For example, when end-times preacher John Hagee, who heads a megachurch in San Antonio, was asked whether he believed Hurricane Katrina to be divine punishment for immorality, he replied: “All hurricanes are acts of God, because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God. . . . [T]here was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. . . . And I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.”¹⁰

David Crowe, the executive director of Restore America, also spoke to the question of why Hurricane Katrina occurred: “The answer,” he explained, “is found in understanding that man is not in control. God is! Everything in the sky, the sea and on earth is subject to His control.” Saying that Katrina was “God’s judgment on America,” Crowe referred to the upcoming “gay, lesbian and transgender ‘Southern Decadence’ Labor Day gala.”¹¹

Given this perspective, extra-deadly hurricanes (as well as droughts, floods, tornadoes, and heat waves) are to be explained in terms of divine policies, not in terms of human energy policies. To be sure, extreme weather events are the fault of human beings, but because of sexual sins, not because of burning too much coal, oil, and natural gas.

The belief in divine omnipotence is very dangerous, because of the climate complacency it encourages. It is especially dangerous when it is held by people in positions of power in the most powerful nation on Earth, such as Senator Inhofe, Representative Shimkus, and Congressman Ralph Hall of Texas, who chaired the House of Representative's Science, Space, and Technology Committee. With regard to climate change, he said: "I don't think we can control what God controls."¹²

This attitude can also influence the business world. For example, with respect to the concern that the planet's temperature is becoming too warm, Peter Brabeck, the chairman of the Nestlé corporation, said: "Are we God to say the climate, as it is today, is the one we have to keep? That's the way it's going to be? We are not God."¹³

The supernaturalistic worldview has been used to support many beliefs that tend to promote ethically destructive beliefs, one of which is climate complacency.¹⁴ But can it be called clearly false?

2. Supernaturalism as Anti-Scientific

The supernaturalistic worldview, as exemplified by theists such as Erickson, Inhofe, Shimkus, Limbaugh, and Beisner, can be called false insofar as anti-scientific beliefs must be considered false. There are at least four ways in which the supernaturalistic beliefs cited above are anti-scientific.

Infallible Scriptures

As John Shimkus showed in the statement quoted above, he regards the Bible as "the infallible word of God." According to this belief, everything in the Bible is true, because it was infallibly (technically, "inerrantly") inspired, so that whatever the Bible says about the future "is the way it's going to be for [God's] creation."

However, this view is contradicted by the scientific (or "critical") study of the Bible, which began in earnest in the 17th century.¹⁵ Beginning with simply pointing out hundreds of false assertions in the Old and New Testaments, the scholars then pointed out that the various books of the Bible expressed very different beliefs, showing that it could not have simply been written by a single author (God), or even fact-checked by an omniscient proof-reader.¹⁶

The idea of infallible inspiration presupposes the belief in supernatural interruption: The normal way in which human beings arrive at their beliefs is an extremely fallible process, in which false beliefs can enter in through prejudice, wishful thinking, party spirit, the limited information available at a given time and place, and countless other factors. The belief that the ideas put forth by some particular human writers were infallible and inerrant, guaranteed to be devoid of error, presupposes that in these writers, the normal human processes of belief-formation, with their fallibility and tendency to error, have been supernaturally overruled, so that pure, unadulterated truth came forth. But the scientific study of the Bible has been showing since the late 17th century that this view of the Bible is untrue.

To settle the truth about global warming by appeal to the Bible, while ignoring the results of

the scientific study of this collection of writings, would be analogous to using the writings of René Descartes (1596-1650), along with those of Plato and Aristotle, to explain the truth about physics, chemistry, biology, and cosmology.

Miraculous Interventions

As shown above, Millard Erickson says that his faith-community's supernaturalism affirms miracles, and not simply in the sense that astounding things sometimes happen, but that, whereas nature "ordinarily functions in uniform" ways, God sometimes acts "in ways which contravene these normal patterns." This is, in fact, the definition of supernaturalism, and this is the worldview that modern science has wholly rejected, at least since the middle of the 19th century.

Since then, the scientific world's most basic presupposition has been naturalism, understood simply as the denial of supernatural interruptions of the world's causal processes. In his famous *Science and the Modern World*, written after he came to Harvard, mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that the scientific mentality "instinctively holds that all things great and small are conceivable as exemplifications of general principles which reign throughout the natural order," so that "every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles."¹⁷

Scientific naturalism, in other words, is simply the view that the world's causal web, with its general causal principles, cannot be interrupted from time to time. Unfortunately, the term "naturalism" has also come to be used for a much more restrictive view, according to which naturalism involves both materialism and atheism. That view, however, is only a particular version of naturalism, which is not entailed by science. Science requires naturalism only in the sense that the normal patterns of the world are never violated.

An example of a scientist who has failed to recognize this distinction is Harvard biologist Richard Lewontin. In a review of a book by Carl Sagan, which had a materialistic standpoint, Lewontin said that explanations of phenomena on the basis of such a standpoint sometimes result in "patent absurdity." Nevertheless, Lewontin said, science has "a prior commitment to materialism" that is "absolute," because "we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. . . . To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen."¹⁸

Lewontin evidently did not know that since the 18th-century Enlightenment there have been ideas of deity that rule out omnipotence in the sense of allowing the regularities of nature to be ruptured. Whitehead himself, in fact, came to affirm such an idea.¹⁹

In any case, although belief in God as such does not necessarily lead to climate complacency, the supernaturalistic idea of God tends to do so.

Young Earth

Supernaturalism also allows people to endorse an alternative to science's evolutionary worldview, according to which humans and other mammals developed through millions of years of biological evolution, built upon billions of years of cosmic and geological evolution. Supernaturalism, with its omnipotent deity, allows people to accept the idea that our world

came about only a few thousand years ago.

Although the type of theism that Whitehead developed holds that God influences the evolutionary process, he said that God did not have the kind of power that could bring about developments in the world unilaterally and hence suddenly. Saying that all the entities of which the world is composed have their own power, Whitehead regarded divine power as persuasive rather than coercive. He held, accordingly, that God could have brought the world to its present state only by means of a very long, slow, step-by-step process.

By contrast, supernaturalistic theism, holding that the world has no power of its own *vis-à-vis* God with which it could resist the divine will, holds that God did not need to employ a long evolutionary process. Indeed, 46% of Americans, according to a 2012 Gallup poll, say that God actually did create our world within the past 10,000 years.²⁰

Given this view, combined with the end-times belief that the world will not last much longer, it is no surprise that Evangelicals are less concerned about global warming than Americans in general. From the supernaturalistic point of view, even if God does not use omnipotent power to prevent global warming from destroying civilization, our planet's becoming unfit for human life would not be much of a tragedy, because God could, if desired, simply create a new one.

This idea that our world is only about 10,000 years old undermines the basis for realizing the full seriousness of global warming for civilization – that it is taking us out of the Holocene era, which, coming after a 100,000-year ice age, was warm enough and stable enough for civilization to emerge and endure. Because civilization has always existed in the Holocene era, we have no evidence that it can survive if this era is left behind.

Whereas evolution has long been rejected by a large number of Americans, Republicans have increasingly been introducing bills in state houses that would rule out, or at least provide alternatives to, both climate science and evolutionary science. In response to this twofold attack on science, the National Center for Science Education expanded its mission: Having been founded in 1981, it was originally devoted to “defending the teaching of evolution.” But since 2012, it has been devoted to “defending the teaching of evolution & climate science.”²¹

The fact that climate-science-denial is now joined at the hip in Republican politics with evolution-denial shows that the rejection of this consensus reached by climate scientists is an anti-science position. Indeed, bills with this combination are sometimes referred to simply as “anti-science” bills. This two-fold denial was illustrated by the fact that, just as all the Republican presidential candidates in 2012 except Jon Huntsman rejected climate science, they also would not profess belief in evolution. That this double denial had become the norm was driven home by Huntsman's 2011 tweet, “I believe in evolution and trust scientists on global warming. Call me crazy.”²²

The Problem of Evil

A fourth basis for rejecting supernaturalistic theism as anti-rational is its problem of evil. Trying to show the consistency between the world's evil and the power and goodness of the world's creator has been called “theodicy,” meaning “justifying the ways of God.” But this has proved impossible within the framework of supernaturalistic theism.

The seventeenth-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz recognized that, if God is perfectly good as well as both omniscient and omnipotent, there could be no genuine evil. The traditional argument goes: “God is perfectly omniscient and omnipotent, so God could prevent all evil. God is perfectly good, so God would want to prevent all evil; but evil exists; therefore, God does not exist.” Leibniz avoided this conclusion by denying that evil exists, saying, notoriously that our world is “the best of all possible worlds.” But eighteenth-century *philosophe* Voltaire parodied this view in *Candide*, illustrating that no one could consistently believe that nothing genuinely evil ever happens.

Nowadays, it is for the most part simply assumed by philosophers and other intellectuals that the problem of evil disproves the existence of God. For example, former Oxford philosopher John Mackie wrote a book called *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God*, in which he concluded that the reasons against belief in God, especially the problem of evil, are decisive. Mackie’s argument did not really refute the rationality of theism as such, because he limited his treatment to *supernaturalistic* theism, according to which God is “able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent).” Mackie admitted that one who believes in a deity that is “though powerful, not quite omnipotent, will not be embarrassed by this difficulty.”²³

However, the idea of a divine being who is omnipotent as well as perfectly good cannot be salvaged, so supernaturalistic theism does not have a self-consistent conception of God.²⁴ This form of theism is anti-rational, hence anti-scientific.

Conclusion

Climate complacency has been encouraged by several features of supernaturalistic Christian theism, including infallible scriptures, miraculous interventions, anti-evolutionary Young Earth beliefs, end-times beliefs, and the idea that the world’s creator can be both omnipotent and perfectly good. Because Evangelicals largely endorse these ideas, it is no wonder that self-identified Evangelicals are less likely than Americans in general to be very concerned about global warming. And given the high percentage of Americans who are self-identified Evangelicals, this form of theism goes far to explain why Americans are “less worried about climate change than almost anyone else.” But just as the government and the media generally do not allow anti-rational beliefs to shape public policy, they should not allow anti-scientific religious beliefs to play a role in shaping policies.

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Notes

1. This essay is an adaptation of a chapter entitled “Religious Challenge” in *Unprecedented: Can Civilization Survive the CO₂ Crisis?* (Clarity Press, 2015).

2. Max Fisher, “Americans Are Less Worried about Climate Change than Almost Anyone Else,” *Washington Post*, 27 September 2013; Climate Change: Key Data Points from Pew Research,” Pew Research Center, 2 April 2013.

3. Senator James Inhofe, *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your*

Future (Washington, WND Books, 2012), 70-71; Brian Tashman, "James Inhofe Says the Bible Refutes Climate Change," Right Wing Watch, 3 August 2012.

4. "God Won't Allow Global Warming, Congressman Seeking to Head Energy Committee Says," Raw Story, 11 November 2010.

5. David Edwards, "Limbaugh: Christians 'Cannot Believe in Manmade Global Warming,'" Raw Story, 14 August 2013.

6. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 304, 54.

7. "An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming," Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation. The full title of the declaration is "A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Examination of the Theology, Science, and Economics of Global Warming."

8. Meredith Bennett-Smith, "Calvin Beisner, Evangelical Christian, Claims Environmentalism Great Threat to Civilization," Huffington Post, 21 March 2013.

9. David C. Barker and David H. Bearce, "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change," *Political Research Quarterly*, June 2013.

10. K.C. Boyd, "The End-Times Politics of Pastor John Hagee," AlterNet, 29 January 2013; Ryan Chiachiere and Kathleen Henahan, "Will MSNBC Devote as Much Coverage to McCain's Embrace of Hagee's Support as It Did to Obama's Rejection of Farrakhan?" *Media Matters*, 28 February 2008.

11. David Crowe, "Katrina: God's Judgment on America," Beliefnet, September 2005.

12. Jeffrey Mervis, "Ralph Hall Speaks Out on Climate Change," *National Journal*, 14 December 2011.

13. Jo Confino, "Peter Brabeck courts controversy by claiming climate change is largely down to natural cycles and society should focus on adaptation," *Guardian*, 31 January 2014.

14. Although supernaturalism "tends to promote" climate complacency, it does not do so necessarily: There are Evangelical Christians, such as Katherine Hayhoe and Richard Cizik, who are fully involved in work to prevent climate disruption; see Chapter 15 in Griffin, *Unprecedented: Can Civilization Survive the CO₂ Crisis*.

15. Although there is a tendency today to equate "science" with the natural sciences, there are also the social sciences, among which history is arguably the most successful, in the sense that it exemplifies the main criterion of a genuine science, namely, making progress. "Scientific historiography" can be defined as "the study of past events that generates probable knowledge" (as opposed to historiography that does other things, such as offering interpretations or providing narratives); see Harold Kincaid, "Scientific Historiography and the Philosophy of Science" (*History and Theory*, February 2006, 124-33). The historical study of the Bible, moreover, is arguably one of the disciplines in which the most progress has been made.

16. See Mark S. Gignilliat, *A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Zondervan, 2012); Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 61-87.

17. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925; Free Press, 1967), 5, 12.

18. Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," *New York Review of Books*, 9 January 1997: 28-32, at 31.
19. Only after working on philosophy in his 60s did Whitehead give up his atheism or at least agnosticism for (a non-traditional form of) theism; see David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), Chap. 1.
20. Frank Newport, "In U.S., 46% Hold Creationist View of Human Origins," Gallup, 1 June 2012.
21. Stephen D. Foster Jr., "Oklahoma GOP Introduces Bill that Attacks Evolution and Climate Change," Addicting Info, 22 January 2012; Katherine Stewart, "The New Anti-Science Assault on US Schools," *Guardian*, 12 February 2012; "Anti-Evolution and Anti-Climate Science Legislation Scorecard: 2013," National Center for Science Education, 20 May 2013; "Frequently Asked Questions about NCSE," National Center for Science Education.
22. Levy and Evan McMorris-Santoro, "Creationism Controversies: The Norm Among Potential Republican 2016 Contenders," Talking Points Memo, 20 November 2012; Justin Sink, "Huntsman: 'Call Me Crazy,' I Believe in Evolution, Global Warming," E2 Wire, The Hill, 18 August 2011.
23. John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 1, 151.
24. David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (1976; Westminster John Knox, 2004).

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