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RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND CLIMATE CHANGE: FROM ADVOCACY TO ACTION

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper offers an overview of the past and current advocacy and sustainability efforts being led by religious actors, ranging from formal religious governing bodies to individual congregations. It also proposes future research efforts that might strengthen the ability of religious actors to move from general advocacy to advancing concrete climate policy and directly implementing/leading on-the-ground sustainability efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropogenic climate change is one of the most pressing challenges facing the global community in the twenty-first century. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the planet's surface has warmed by between 0.7 and 0.9° C while global atmospheric concentrations of CO2 have risen from 280 ppm to over 400 ppm.[1] These changes have already begun to have wide-ranging effects which are likely to worsen over time, including rising sea levels, decreased crop yields, and increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters.[2] These issues, in turn, lead to human suffering and contribute to other global challenges such as conflict and mass displacement.

The experience of the Paris Agreement demonstrates that religious traditions play an increasingly important role in discussions and negotiations regarding efforts to curtail climate change.

In 2015, representatives of 197 nations negotiated the Paris Agreement, a nonbinding global treaty which asks all parties to set emissions reductions goals (or "nationally determined contributions") so as to limit total global warming to 2° C relative to pre-industrial levels.[3] A core component of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as outlined at Paris is the Green Climate Fund, which uses contributions from around the world to pursue mitigation and adaptation projects in developing countries.[4] Unfortunately, the implementation of the Paris Accords has been somewhat lackluster: The cumulative effect of all nationally determined contributions made so far would likely fail to limit global warming to even a 3° C increase by 2100 over pre-industrial levels, and though the Green Climate Fund has received pledges for contributions worth $10.3 billion, this lags far short of the commitment that industrialized countries made in 2009 to provide $100 billion of funding per year by 2020.[5,6,7]

One significant aspect of the Paris Agreement was the relatively unprecedented degree to which religious traditions and actors were involved. Various religious NGOs were present at the negotiations, and a group of 154 religious leaders from faith groups around the world signed a statement calling for action on climate change which was handed to the executive secretary of the convention, Christiana Figueres.[8] The experience of the Paris Agreement demonstrates that religious traditions play an increasingly important role in discussions and negotiations regarding efforts to curtail climate change. Below we offer an overview of the past advocacy of a number of faith traditions, followed by an assessment of the role that religious traditions are now playing in implementing the goals of the Paris Agreement. We close by discussing possible paths forward and areas in which further research is needed.

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE PAST DECADE

Prior to 2010, relatively few religious traditions offered official statements regarding climate change. Official declarations, when they were adopted, ranged from endorsement of prudential climate action to opposition and skepticism of climate science. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, for instance, issued a statement in 2001 calling for "civil dialogue and prudent and constructive action," the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a 2007 resolution expressing deep skepticism about the reality of global climate change.[9,10] (The following year, the Southern Baptists did revise their position substantially and issue a statement calling for climate action from individuals, churches, and governments, stating that

"Christian moral convictions…demand our environmental stewardship."[11]) Perhaps in part due to the lack of a united narrative from religious actors, as of 2015, Hispanic Catholics were the only religious group in the United States expressing greater confidence in the reality of anthropogenic climate warming than the unaffiliated, and frequent religious observance was correlated with a lower acceptance of scientific consensus on climate change.[12]

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In the lead up to the Paris negotiations, however, authorities in dozens of religious traditions representing billions of people authored or signed strong and uncompromising statements calling for immediate climate action. These statements included Pope Francis's publishing of *Laudato Si*, the Lambeth Declaration on Climate Change issued by the bishops of the Anglican Communion, and an Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change signed by Muslim leaders at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium.[13,14,15] The year 2015 also saw a Hindu Declaration on Climate Change, a Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders, and a Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis.[16,17,18] Since the ratification of the Paris Accords, religious advocacy has continued to grow: In 2016, a new Evangelical Call to Action was issued by a number of prominent evangelical leaders, and the Methodist Church updated its *Book of Discipline* to include a section explicitly calling for global climate stewardship.[19,20] In short, the past five years have seen most of the world's religions coalescing around the common goal of advocating for action to address climate change.

This advocacy work will remain crucial until there are domestic and international structures that can effectively limit greenhouse gas emissions. Nonetheless, the Paris Agreement represented a strong step in that direction, establishing a framework—especially via the Green Climate Fund—that can begin to take concrete steps to reduce emissions and pursue climate change adaptation. The remainder of this section explores the ways in which religious traditions are transitioning from advocating for climate action in the abstract to pursuing tangible implementation goals now that some international structures exist to foster climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Religious Actors and the Green Climate Fund

Under the Paris Agreement, there are two main paths for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The first is through the emissions reductions committed by each national government, and while religious actors can certainly continue to advocate for implementation of these reductions goals, there is less they can do to foster national compliance. The second pathway is through the funding of particular projects in the developing world, which is overseen by the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The GCF seeks to engage regional, national, and international organizations at numerous stages of its internal processes. Entities—including faith-based organizations—can apply for observer status, which allows them access to non-public information as well as participation in board meetings of the GCF. All observers are categorized as either civil society organizations (CSOs) or private sector organizations (PSOs), and while every organization, once accredited, has access to non-public information, only two CSOs and two PSOs at a time are permitted to be "active observers," which grants representation at GCF board meetings.[21] (Active observer status is determined by a self-selection process and lasts for two years.) Of the several dozen currently accredited non-active observers, a small number are faith-based organizations, including the American Jewish World Service, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Catholic Relief Services, Christian Aid, and World Vision International.[22] No faith-based organizations are currently active observers.

The GCF does not directly implement the projects that it funds. Rather, other organizations—usually large-scale international banks—apply for accreditation and offer project proposals. These accredited organizations, if provided funding by the GCF, may often partner with additional executing entities to implement a project. Currently, none of the accredited organizations are faith-based organizations, and no executing entities on any of the roughly 80 projects which have received GCF funding have any faith identity. This is due, at least in part, to the extremely rigorous accreditation process the GCF has adopted, which has already proved too onerous for some governments in the developing world.[23] Few faith-based organizations have the resources to manage such a complex accreditation process. The unfortunate reality is that faith-based organizations are currently having only a marginal impact on the implementation of mitigation and adaptation projects through the Green Climate Fund.

Continued Faith-Based Advocacy

Nonetheless, this lack of influence in project oversight does not mean that faith-based organizations are no longer an important component in the overall implementation of the Paris Agreement. Many religious traditions continue to offer public advocacy in favor of climate action beyond simply issuing public statements, and many faith-based organizations are increasingly involved in the process of making actual policy. The most public example of this type of advocacy came during the Paris negotiations themselves, when a group of 154 religious leaders signed a statement calling for immediate action to address climate change.[24] Religiously motivated advocacy since that time, however, has moved beyond merely exhorting the world to take action and has begun to address the issue at a greater degree of granularity.

Religious traditions are very much engaged in the work of reducing climate change emissions at local levels, especially in the developing world. These efforts, however, do not appear to be part of any integrated, trans-national strategy; most of the time, they consist of local initiatives started by religious leaders.

For instance, the 23rd Session of the Conference of Parties (or COP23, a follow-up to the Paris negotiations in 2017) established the Talanoa Dialogue, a forum for the parties to take stock of progress that has been made toward achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement.[25] Unlike previous forums for climate change-related issues, the Talanoa Dialogue allows non-parties—including faith-based organizations and other civil society members—to submit inputs, including proposals for how governments might most effectively reduce carbon emissions, with a guarantee that these proposals will be considered in the upcoming COP24 in December 2018. Multiple faith-based organizations have submitted inputs to the Talanoa Dialogue this year, including Christian Aid, the World Council of Churches, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, the Society of Friends, and Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand (an agency of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference).[26]

Beyond merely reiterating support for climate action, each of these reports shares stories about particular ways in which religious organizations have worked to combat climate change. The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation discusses at great length a successful recycling program that has been created and sustained by the foundation.[27] The Society of Friends describes the efforts of Rwandan Quakers to promote sustainable farming.[28] Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand presents the efforts of the Catholic Church to provide wind and solar energy for the Solomon Islands.[29] Viewed together, the contributions of faith-based organizations to the Talanoa Dialogue reveal that religious traditions are very much engaged in the work of reducing climate change emissions at local levels, especially in the developing world. These efforts, however, do not appear to be part of any integrated, trans-national strategy; most of the time, they consist of local initiatives started by religious leaders.[30] The contributions to the Talanoa Dialogues suggest that

faith traditions are beginning to seek to share these success stories as a means of encouraging action elsewhere, but for the time being there exists no attempt to look holistically at the successes and failures of religiously inspired climate action in order to identify best practices or the potential contribution that faith-based organizations can make.

Faith-Based Organizations in the United States

On June 1, 2017, President Trump announced his intention to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement, making the United States the only nation in the world that does not endorse the agreement today. Immediately following the announcement, governors, mayors, and business leaders around the country began to sign the "We Are Still In" agreement, a coalition which now represents the equivalent of the third-largest economy in the world.[31] Nearly 1,000 religious organizations have signed the agreement, including 784 Catholic congregations, dioceses, archdioceses, or affiliated organizations.[32] Of these, a small number have made express commitments to pursue direct impacts by promoting more efficient buildings, increasing the use of renewable energy, or incorporating messages regarding the importance of conservation and stewardship into sermons and engagement with congregations.[33]

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At other climate advocacy events, religious organizations have played an increasingly important role. One recent example came from the Global Climate Action Summit, which was held in San Francisco from September 12 to 14 this year as a way to promote more ambitious climate commitments. At this summit, which representatives of a sizable number of faith traditions attended, both the Dalai Lama and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued statements supporting increased action to address climate change.[34] In fact, the summit included a number of faith-based workshops explicitly planned for the purpose of developing submissions for the Talanoa Dialogue on the issues of compensating loss and damage from climate-related natural disasters and the possibility of a just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.[35]

American churches are also increasingly working to reduce their own carbon footprints and to encourage climate-friendly projects and policies in their communities. Some of these changes are encouraged by interfaith or interchurch organizations; Interfaith Power and Light, for example, works with churches around the country to install solar panels, divest from fossil fuel industries, and find green investments.[36] Other initiatives, ranging from the creation of community gardens to pledge drives for emissions reductions, have been primarily driven by individual congregations.[37] One prominent example comes from the creation of Monterey Bay Community Power, a regional renewable energy joint-powers authority in southern California, the creation of which was partly due to the advocacy of Bishop Richard Garcia.[38] Yet despite the impact that churches are having on their local communities—whether through direct action or political advocacy—there appear to be few attempts to track the different strategies used by various faith traditions, and little evidence exists to suggest that successes in one area have been used to encourage action in different regions or within other churches.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBLE PATHS FORWARD

Nearly all major religious traditions have demonstrated concern about the current lack of climate action on the national and international levels, as well as a desire to promote sustainability in any way possible. Statements calling for climate action have been issued by sources as diverse as Pope Francis, Anglican bishops, Jewish rabbis, and conferences of leaders in the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and evangelical faith traditions. Local conservation projects have been initiated by churches in virtually all of these faith traditions, and most have engaged in direct advocacy for more serious climate action. Yet despite this level of commitment to the issue, faith-based organizations currently occupy a very marginal position in the implementation of adaptation and mitigation projects under the GCF, and few church-led efforts to pursue tangible emissions reductions have had effects beyond an individual congregation.

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This discrepancy may be due, in large part, to a lack of available information between different faith traditions. Although many different churches or denominations have pursued successful conservation projects within their own organizations, there do not appear to be any attempts to compile these success stories across faith traditions in order to provide resources for other organizations interested in pursuing similar projects. The notoriously difficult accreditation process for the GCF has prevented any faith-based organizations from completing the process (yet), and no religious organizations are currently involved in the implementation of GCF projects on the local level. Yet this may be due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the GCF itself with respect to the keen interest of many religious organizations to serve as local implementing partners for large climate projects.

These are problems which could be solved with sufficient research and coordination of efforts. The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs proposes to commit resources to pursuing these questions, seeking (1) to identify faith-based organizations interested in aiding the implementation of climate projects funded by the GCF; (2) to compile a list of churches and denominations that have pursued successful conservation projects of their own; (3) to provide this information to policymakers and religious leaders; (4) to convene meetings designed to provide technical advice to faith-based and grassroots organizations in an effort to help them become accredited and/or to receive GCF funding directly or as subawards from accredited organizations; and (5) to serve as partner, advisor, and convener to cities and local governments devising local environmental action plans in an effort to help incorporate houses of worship and faith communities into their plans. Research and support in these areas could improve the efficacy of religious organizations seeking to make an impact in addressing climate change while simultaneously making the case for a greater inclusion of religious voices in policy decisions and international project implementation.

Endnotes

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ABOUT THE BERKLEY CENTER

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Two premises guide the center's work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace. To this end, the center engages students, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in analysis of and dialogue on critical issues in order to increase the public understanding of religion.

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