

**“Cutting through the Climate Change Fog:  
An Urgent Religious Concern” ©**

by

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**READING:** "To commune with nature we must find something within ourselves. . . ." Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*.

The reading is by Roger Gottlieb, Professor of Philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, from his book *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*

To commune with nature we must find something within ourselves that is not tied to our social identity, or rooted in complicated verbal self-description. And this we cannot do as doctors or plumbers, Republicans or New Yorkers. We must do it, at least, as beings that breathe and eat, sense the sun, feel the wind and rain, and experience love, fear, and pleasure in their bodies. If trees root to the earth, so do—in rather more mobile ways—our own legs. In the earth's surface is 80 percent water, so is our own body. Human children frolicking in the grass can surely remind us of kittens playing, and ten thousand ants working together are not, seen in a certain light, all that different from workers headed for a day at the office. As the trees breathe out, we breathe in—and vice versa. Our eyes have evolved to see this landscape, our ears to hear these birds and rustling leaves, our tongues to taste the food that grows here. Trying to cut ourselves loose from the earth is as foolish as denying that we were formed by our families and our native cultures.

We may have forgotten all this, but surely we can, if we choose, remember. To do so, we will have to move out of our normal egos—a move, interestingly, that religion has always asked us to make. Whether it is the state beyond attachment of Buddhism or Islam's complete submission to God, faiths teach us that we must go a little crazy if we are to become truly sane. We must transform ourselves: literally uproot our physical body (as when Abraham has to leave the land of his father) and our social position (as when Jesus told the rich man to give his wealth to the poor).

It is also true that in most religious narratives we can experience life beyond the ego only after, and in part because of, some kind of crisis. Jesus must die before he can fully realize his Divinity; the Jews have to suffer slavery and wander in the wilderness before they can fully embrace the Torah; fledgling Buddhists spend thousands of frustrating and lonely hours on the meditation mat wrestling with their egos. What those events and processes were to traditional

religion, the environmental crisis is to religion now. Sensing the gravity of our situation, bereft from all our losses, knowing that the future may hold much worse, a fundamental ground is being removed from under our feet and a sheltering canopy taken from above our heads. Our need to sense a communion with the earth is not just about how grand the universe is or how complex and marvelous ecosystems are. It is also about the cry of the earth and the cry of other human beings who are suffering. This cry will either provoke a new sense of self, or humanity will choke on its own wastes. (43-44).

## INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, I was talking to someone about today's discussions about climate change that we considering today in this worship service and later at 2 PM when I give an hour presentation on the science of climate change and renewable energy as one of major solutions global warming. The person commented, "Oh are you going to talk about that? Are you also planning on talking about the end of Earth in 2012 with the end of the Mayan calendar?"

I said, "No I wasn't. 2012 is superstition and global warming is science."

The person who said that to me had bought into the all-too-common notion that climate change and global warming are voodoo science similar to predictions that the alignment of the Earth's orbit with the black hole in galactic center supposedly in 2012 will cause massive solar flares from the Sun that will fry the Earth.



This person's equating climate science with apocalyptic predictions of the Earth's end is not surprising given the millions of dollars spent by corporations and some well-to-do individuals to discredit climate change science. So in the case of climate change, almost all climate scientists and the world's major scientific organizations support the idea that global warming is real and that the warming is caused primarily by the human burning of fossil fuels. On the other hand, you would be hard-put to find a reputable scientist

who wouldn't be highly skeptical about the Earth being fried in 2012 by solar flares.

Climate change is not some flight of fancy by ivory tower scientists nor is it some spiritual fringe fad of social anarchists. It is real science, and highly sophisticated science. The conclusions of climate science point to an urgency to do something now to begin reversing global warming.

Despite the urgency, the climate deniers have convinced a large percentage of the American public that climate change is a hoax. Today during this sermon and this afternoon with more detail, I hope to dispel this notion and point the way to needed changes in how we use

energy on this planet as a way of halting the warming of Earth that has been occurring for decades.

This urgent action is a vital religious concern.

## NO GOOD PULLING THE COVERS OVER OUR HEADS

During the settled ministry start-up workshop, last Sunday with your church leaders, one of the questions the facilitator for the meeting asked me was, when thinking about your work as minister, what is it that makes you want to pull the covers over your head and go back to sleep in the morning. I am not going to speak to my answer to that question now, but to reflect on the feeling when things seem just too much, when you would rather pull the covers over your head and spend the rest of the day in bed. The prospect of global climate change and the environmental crisis that is most likely ensuing can give us that just-too-much feeling that can immobilize us and make us want to pull the covers over our heads.

Roger Gottlieb knew that feeling when he wrote what I read just several minutes ago [quoted above], “Sensing the gravity of our situation, bereft from all our losses, knowing that the future may hold much worse, a fundamental ground is being removed from under our feet and a sheltering canopy taken from above our heads.” You know when things bad happen there are several stages: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Quite a few people are in denial and anger now over the fact that “the sheltering canopy [has been] taken from over our heads.”



Some are bargaining trying to pick holes in the science, and some are depressed at the huge effort that must be made globally to change the situation. Yet others have accepted the situation and are willing to work to make some changes.

This is what I am encouraging today—accept what is happening, don't deny it, and decide to act differently. If we continue what we are doing, there will be great suffering, and it may be that the global civilization that we have known in our lifetimes may collapse. The ocean will rise, and people who live on the coasts will be flooded out. Millions of people,

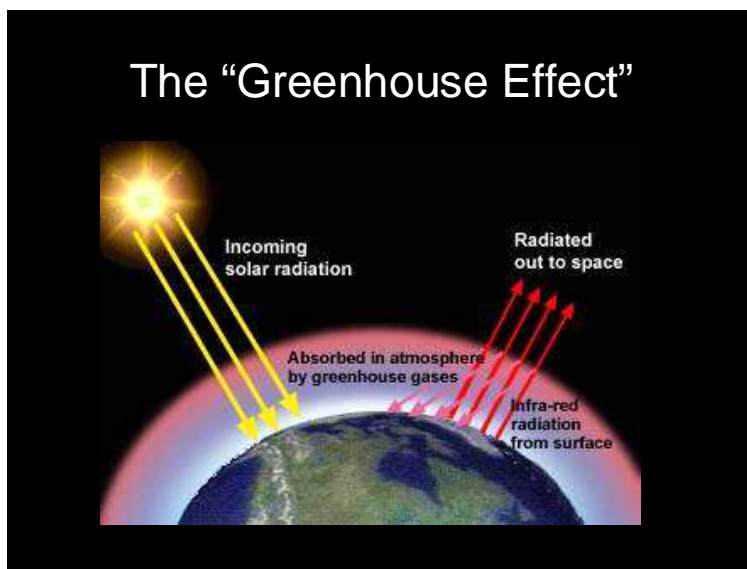
particularly in Asia, who depend on melting glaciers for domestic and agricultural water, will be devastated as glaciers disappear. Species that have existed for as long as human beings walked this planet will become extinct at an alarming rate. Once productive crop land will have to switch to pasture as soil moisture decreases. Storms will be more violent as there is more energy in the atmosphere and on the oceans. Coral reefs will disappear as the oceans acidify from increased dissolved carbon dioxide.

## CREDIBLE RELIGION INCLUDES CREDIBLE SCIENCE

When you are up against something that may have serious consequences, it is good to understand what is happening. So I am going to speak a bit about the science of global warming

and climate change. Anyone who speaks credibly about religion today has to include credible science in speaking of religion. I am going to describe the science of global warming before I speak of the religious implications of global warming and in fact how religion can provide hope for changing the situation.

Just to give you a bit of a refresher about the green house effect. The Earth receives solar radiation from the sun and the greenhouse gases are transparent to solar radiation, but not to infrared radiation. When the land and ocean absorbs solar radiation from the sun, it emits infrared radiation. Water vapor and carbon dioxide as well as trace atmospheric gases trap some of the infrared radiation before it goes into outer space—much like the glass on a greenhouse holds the heat in the greenhouse. This is good because without the greenhouse effect the average temperature of the Earth would be zero degrees Fahrenheit instead of its balmy 60 degrees—at least for New England that’s balmy.



But what is happening because of burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and other agricultural and land use practices, the amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are increasing. Higher levels of greenhouse gases mean more infrared heat is trapped and the average global temperature rises. Right now the carbon dioxide levels are higher than they have been in over half a million years, and ocean and air temperatures are increasing.<sup>1</sup>

## THE URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

With rising global temperatures, we can expect rising sea levels due to melting ice sheets on Greenland and the Antarctic, more violent weather, increased desertification in some areas of the planet, in some areas, increased disease, and so forth.

Virtually all climate scientists, who are actively working in the field, think that this is a likely scenario. In 2007 the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report confirming most of these findings and stating:

*Warming of the climate is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global mean sea level.<sup>2</sup>*

The UN Panel included the participation of 619 climate scientists from across the globe. Only

<sup>1</sup> In 2007 the average carbon dioxide level in the earth’s atmosphere was 384 parts per million. Ice core samples from Antarctica going back 400,000 years indicate a range of carbon dioxide ranging from 120 to 300 parts per million. There are strong correlations between global carbon dioxide levels and mean global temperatures.

<sup>2</sup>quoted in McFague, \_A New Climate for Theology\_, 9.

one of these scientists has signed a position paper skeptical of global warming; whereas, 160 of these scientists who contributed to the UN Panel, have signed statements supporting activists policies on climate change.

Now I realize that true science is falsifiable. It only takes one contradictory set of data to upset an entire hypothesis or theory.

The few scientific skeptics are so because they say the data and climate models are poor and don't justify action. One of the skeptics was the late Dr. Joanne Simpson, the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in meteorology in the US. She eventually became NASA's lead weather researcher and has authored or co-authored over 190 articles. She said this about global warming:

*What should we as a nation do? Decisions have to be made on incomplete information. In this case, we must act on the recommendations of Gore and the [UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] because if we do not reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and the climate models are right, the planet as we know it will in this century become unsustainable. But as a scientist I remain skeptical.*

## Distorting Climate Science and Scientists' Opinions



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works website. The page features a navigation menu on the left with links to MAJORITY PAGE, MINORITY PAGE, MEMBERS, SUBCOMMITTEES, LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR, COMMITTEE RESOURCES, CONTACT, NOMINATIONS, and HEARINGS. The main content area is titled "The Inhofe EPW Press Blog" and contains a press release dated December 11, 2008, titled "U. S. Senate Minority Report: More Than 700 International Scientists Dissent Over Man-Made Global Warming Claims". The report is attributed to Marc Morano and includes several updates: "Update: March 17, 2009: 59 Scientists Join Senate Report", "Update: January 28, 2009: James Hansen's Former NASA Supervisor Declares Himself a Skeptic", and "Update: December 22, 2008: More Prominent Scientists Join Senate Report". A link to a "Full Printable 255-Page PDF Report" is provided at the bottom of the entry. The background of the website features a polar bear walking on a melting ice floe.

It's disconcerting to think that Dr. Simpson's reasoned approach to climate change, has been distorted by professional climate deniers and her statement "as a scientist I remain

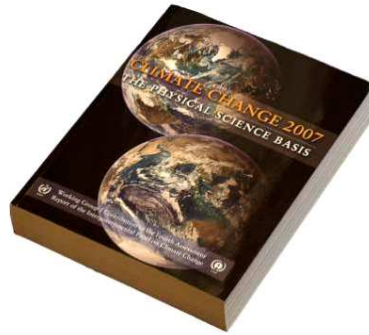
skeptical” has been quoted out of context with the omission of her call for political action on climate change. I will speak more about that this afternoon at 2 about these dishonest tactics of professional climate deniers.

## GLOBAL WARMING IS A RELIGIOUS CONCERN

To me Dr. Simpson’s assessment of the situation makes sense. Some have argued that if we go through the expense to reduce greenhouse emissions, it could throw the world into a global economic recession. But if the models are reasonable right, global warming will include a world economic recession plus a planet that all at once will not be able to support its population and great suffering for all species will happen.

## 2007 IPCC Report

- “*Warming of the climate is unequivocal.*”
- “*..very likely due to anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations.*”



The other point is that even if global warming models are wrong—however unlikely that is— and the planet is not warming due to human activities, many of the actions to address global warming would need to be done anyway—like more use of renewable fuels to reduce reliance on soon-to-be dwindling fossil fuels, sustainable use of the oceans and the land, better protection of species diversity, addressing the great disparities between the economic developed and undeveloped countries, addressing global health problems, seeing that no person on this planet dies because of lack of access to food, shelter, clean water, and medical care.

*"A strong, credible body of scientific evidence shows that **climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks** for a broad range of human and natural systems."*

- U.S. National Academy of Sciences, 2010



Global warming is not just a scientific issue; it is a human justice issue, species justice issue, and a religious issue. Religions throughout the world influence how people view their world and a person's worldview affects their behavior. Too often religion has supported views that allow exploitation of the Earth and encourages us to ignore the fact we humans are Earth creatures.

Remember in Hebrew scripture in Genesis there are two creation stories of human beings—one is about subduing and Earth and having dominion. The second one goes like this with my own translation from the Hebrew:

“And the one God Jehovah, the pre-existing One, formed *ha' adam* the human, [of] the dust of the ground, and breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life; and *ha' adam*, the human, became a *nephesh*, a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7). In this creation story, humans are the earth creature made from dust into which the spirit of the holy was breathed. Considering humans first as the Earth creatures is rethinking religion in light of our present situation demanding that we hold the Earth sacred.

Many in the other world religions are rethinking their stories in similar ways In Buddhism rather than the purpose of religion being a retreat from the world to meditate and enlightenment, it is an engagement with the world at a fundamental level of being in which, as Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh says, we inter-be with all other things. I am not so much a human being as an inter-being whose existence depends as much on the clouds in the sky as the beating of my heart.

## CONCLUSION

The present global environmental crisis requires that religions rethink some religious ideas in light of this crisis. This rethinking is occurring in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous people's religions. The degree of this rethinking of religion hasn't been seen for over 2000 years. And you know what? Hopedale Unitarian Parish has a vital role to play in this rethinking. Each one of you can make a difference.

In my presentation this afternoon, I will show some scenes from the film *Apollo 13*. One scene is where the astronauts are on their way back to Earth after a fire in the spacecraft, and it doesn't look good. Chris Kraft the NSAS mission director says to a reporter that it doesn't look like they will make it, and Gene Krantz the flight director overhears the exchange and says “With all due respect, sir, this will be our finest hour.” And I say to each of you and to anyone who denies the seriousness of the situation or who is depressed and despairing that we won't make it, “Sir or Ma'am, with all due respect, this will be our finest hour.” In a world without end, Amen.