

Trump, climate change and white US Evangelicalism

*President Trump's **withdrawal** from the Paris climate accord last week was made possible by the rise of a climate-denying faction within white US Evangelicalism. Over the past decade this growing faction has come to regard the very idea of climate change as a threat to their identity, presenting climate discourse as a cultural attack on the embattled Christian identity. **Willis Jenkins** argues that we should view this climate denial not as the result of a religious narrative, but as a way of avoiding accountability for polluting the atmosphere.*



Image: Flickr, Gage Skidmore

President Trump's repudiation of the Paris climate accord was made possible by the rise of a religious faction that has been rapidly growing within U.S. Evangelicalism. While a significant number of U.S. Evangelical leaders publicly supported government action on climate change in the past, over the past five months, as the Trump administration has gutted environmental protections and scoffed at climate change, most of those leaders have remained crucially silent. Why?

White U.S. Evangelicals are typically **more skeptical** of climate change than other U.S. citizens, other religious groups, and even more than their Latin-American and African-American coreligionists. In fact, according to **a study from the American Academy of Religion**, African-American Protestants – who should be theologically proximate to White Evangelicals, and in some cases may attend the same churches – report the highest levels of climate concern of any religious group. Meanwhile Evangelical Christians in other countries do not exhibit the same enthusiasm for fossil fuel energy nor skepticism toward climate action. While there is **reason to be cautious** about drawing conclusions from such data, it is impossible to miss that there is something peculiar to how Evangelicals *who are white U.S. citizens* interpret the religious meaning of climate change.

Over the past decade a growing faction within white U.S. Evangelicalism has come to regard the very idea of climate change as a threat to their identity. The reason seems to have little to do with historic Evangelical beliefs and more to do with a characteristic cultural move. As **Christian Smith**

has shown, American Evangelicals approach many social issues by depicting themselves as an embattled minority contending with conformist demands of a pluralist secular culture.

An ironic consequence of incorporating climate discourse into the cultural performance of aggrieved persecution, however, is precisely a shift in religious identity. The climate-denying form of Evangelicalism becomes increasingly ethnonationalist and strangely allied with fossil-fuel interests, while moving away from the rest of Christianity.

Evidence that historic Evangelical beliefs do not require opposition to climate change may be found in the several major statements underscoring its moral gravity. In 2006 many prominent Evangelical pastors and college presidents issued an “**Evangelical Call to Action**,” stating that “it is time for our country to help solve the problem of global warming.” In 2011 the National Association of Evangelicals published a report on connections of climate change and human vulnerability, **Loving the Least of These**. That same year, Evangelicals from around the world developed the **Cape Town Commitment**, an international “confession of faith and call to action,” which includes this summons:

“Probably the most serious and urgent challenge faced by the physical world now is the threat of climate change. This will disproportionately affect those in poorer countries...World poverty and climate change need to be addressed together and with equal urgency.”

In recent years, an insurgent campaign has sought to undermine such concern by presenting climate discourse as the latest vehicle of cultural attack on the embattled Christian identity. The campaign has nurtured **the apocalyptic fears** luridly depicted in the in the popular **novels of Tim Lahaye and Craig Parshall**, where a “One Planet / One Religion” movement forces all faiths to conform to global ecosocialism. The non-fiction **Resisting the Green Dragon video series** turns that fear into serious religious education by explicitly warning Christians to beware sentiments of ecological concern as insidious paganism.

(If there is a paganism that white American Christians should worry about, it is the white ethnonationalism emboldened by Trump’s election, **some forms of which explicitly** appropriate pre-Christian European mythologies. Such *Volk* have been **marching in my town**. I would tell pagan-fearing Evangelicals: there may well be a **Grand Dragon** vying for the soul of your children, but he’s not green.)

The campaign to sow religious fear of the idea of climate change seems to be working. With a **few important exceptions**, most white U.S. leaders involved in those earlier statements have gone silent. Their muted concern, combined with **prayers for a fossil-fuel resurgence**, helped facilitate a threshold shift in environmental policy, giving moral cover for the Trump administration to make the U.S. a climate scofflaw.

Meanwhile, the climate-denying faction in white Evangelicalism seems to be growing. Against the trend observers might expect, **young Evangelical pastors are more likely** than older ones to interpret climate discourse as part of a hostile worldview. Within this faction, rejecting the whole idea of climate change has become important for counter-cultural Evangelical identity.

Understanding why climate denial plays a central role in this emerging form of religious identity requires hypotheses that run deeper than the offered rationales. **Reporting** about climate-denying Evangelicals often focuses on their claims that they do not worry about climate change because it is in God’s hands or is part of an eschatological scenario. Leaving the story there can make it seem that climate denial is the accidental side-effect of a strange religious narrative. A key to interpreting the practical significance of beliefs about providence and eschatology, however, is that they are not so much about a revealed schedule of events as they are about the limits of human responsibility.



It makes some cultural sense that a group would hesitate in supposing that humans bear practical responsibility for the atmosphere. The sky has often been **the symbolic province of deities** and/or stochastic forces operating at scales beyond human reach. Appeals to providence could be one vernacular in which to articulate the difficulty of thinking responsibility at planetary scales. But why it should be so uniquely difficult for white Evangelicals in the United States to take onboard such responsibility suggests that this demographic is grasping for a way to avoid accountability for polluting the atmosphere.

Appeals to providence, I think, function to let white settler societies remain unaccountable for climate change. In its American ethnonationalist versions, providence continues, as it has in the past, to license settler sovereignty over resources in the remaining indigenous territories. In North America, energy extraction offers the last best way to take unceded indigenous land, perhaps **by building an oil pipeline through it**.

In her ethnography of *Living in Denial*, Kari Norgaard writes that “privileged people around the world will be faced with more and more opportunities either to develop a moral imagination and imagine the reality of what is happening or to construct their own innocence from the resources of their culture’s particular toolkit.” What makes climate-denying Evangelical construction of innocence especially powerful is that, by interpreting climate change as a hostile religious idea, they can receive criticism as further evidence of their persecuted status.

Those very dynamics, however, are driving the climate-denying faction within white US Evangelicalism in a lonely religious direction. While **Roman Catholic** and **Eastern Orthodox** leaders have been making care for earth a theological priority, and while responsibility for climate change is broadly accepted as a Christian obligation across mainline Protestantism as well as most of nonwhite and global Evangelicalism, these white U.S Evangelicals interpret environmental sentiment as part of an anti-Christian conspiracy. Allying themselves with **spiritual contempt for earth**, they have begun to separate themselves from mutually recognizing networks of Christianity.

Not all white U.S. Evangelicals identify with this faction of course, so observers of religion should take care to differentiate it. Christian theologians call it petro-manichaeism (recoiling from the demonic earth, it takes spiritual satisfaction in energy ripped from dark material and transformed into light and air). Scholars of new religious movements may prefer to capture its racialized dimension by classifying it as an Anthropocene *Volk Religion*. What its proper term, this new religious formation is both novel and powerful.

About the author



Willis Jenkins is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. He is the author of two award-winning books: *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics & Christian Theology* and *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, & Religious Creativity*.

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