

**Climate Change and the Christian Church:**  
**The Church's Understanding of Climate Change and Its Effect on U.S. Politics**

**KITANI Kanan**

気候変動とキリスト教：教会の気候変動に対する理解と米国政治への影響

木 谷 佳 楠

## Abstract

Scientists have documented that anthropogenic sources of greenhouse gases lead to an accumulation in the atmosphere, resulting in a general warming of the global climate and an alteration in the statistical distribution of localized weather patterns over long periods. Such assessment is endorsed by most scientists, climatologists, and international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). On the other hand, a social consensus on climate change does not exist, especially in the United States. According to a Pew Research Center poll in 2014, the acceptance rate of anthropogenic climate warming is 50% among the public. In the United States, Christianity and science often clash, as seen in the 1920s evolution controversy and the recent struggle between different values, often called the *culture wars*. The central issues at stake in this clash over values include abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and universal health care; however, a major issue in recent years has been differences in the notion of whether climate change is anthropogenic or not. Culture wars are regarded, in general, as conflicts over values that can be simplified into a clash between conservatives and liberals. However, those conflicts are made even more complicated to solve when religion and politics are involved, and the same applies to the issue of climate change. Against this background, this paper focuses on the relationship between Christianity and politics in the United States and analyzes the major denominations' understanding of climate change. In particular, the following three points will be discussed: the Biblical passages that provide evidence for Christians who question the view that climate change is anthropogenic; the connections certain Christian denominations have with politics; and the kinds of statements major Christian denominations in the United States issue on climate change.

**Keywords:** climate change, United States, Christianity, politics, public policy

## 要 旨

気候変動の人為起源については、気候変動に関する政府間パネル（IPCC）などの研究によって科学的コンセンサスは得られているが、その一方で社会的コンセンサスは特に米国などでは得られていないようである。2014年のPew Research Centerの世論調査によると、温暖化の原因が人為的活動によるものであることを受容する米国民の数は50%であった。米国では、1970年代後半から文化戦争と呼ばれる価値観の違いによる対立が社会に分断をもたらしており、その主な争点は人工妊娠中絶、同性婚、銃規制、国民皆保険等である。この文化戦争は保守派とリベラル派の対立構造として単純化される傾向にあるが、それに宗教と政治が絡むと問題は更に複雑化し、解決困難な問題となってしまう。近年、まさに米国における気候変動を巡る問題がそのような文化戦争の様相を呈しているのである。このような背景から、本稿では米国における宗教と政治の関係に注目し、①キリスト教徒の気候変動懐疑論の根拠となる聖書箇所、②特定の教派と政治との相関性、そして③代表的なキリスト教諸教派の気候変動に対する声明文、という3点について調査研究する。

**キーワード:** 気候変動、アメリカ、教会、政治、公共政策

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and the environment has been studied during the past 50 years, mainly in response to the criticism made by historian Lynn White Jr., in his essay published in 1967 titled “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” in which he argued that Christian teaching has a negative influence on the environment due to its anthropocentrism. By examining the roots of modern ecological destruction, White asserted that Christianity’s anthropocentrism, which is especially prevalent in Western Europe and North America, endorsed and instigated a synthesis of science and technology, a destructive union of the theoretical and empirical approaches to our natural environment. White concluded his essay with a suggestion to venerate St. Francis of Assisi as a patron saint for ecologists and revisit St. Francis’s teachings to invoke a sense of the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature. As an inevitable consequence, White’s essay was met with either praise or harsh criticism by scholars in the theological arena.

Scientists have documented that anthropogenic sources of greenhouse gases lead to an accumulation in the atmosphere, resulting in a general warming of the global climate and an alteration in the statistical distribution of localized weather patterns over long periods. Such assessment is endorsed by most scientists, climatologists, and international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). On the other hand, a social consensus on climate change does not exist, especially in the United States. According to a Pew Research Center poll in 2014, the acceptance rate of anthropogenic climate warming is 50% among the public (2015). In the United States, Christianity and science often clash, as seen in the evolution controversy of the Scopes trial that erupted in 1925 and the recent struggle between different values, often called the *culture wars*. The central issues at stake in this clash over values include abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and universal health care; however, a major issue in recent years has been differences in the notion of whether climate change is anthropogenic. Some have suggested that climate change policy has become an axis of conflict in the culture wars in the United States (Hoffman, 2012; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Culture wars are regarded, in general, as conflicts over values that can be simplified into a clash between conservatives, who want to preserve the traditional values of “good old America,” and liberals, who demand a renewed vision of America in line with the changing social landscape. They are made even more complicated to solve when religion and politics are involved, and the same can be said for the issue of climate change.

In terms of politics, former President Donald Trump, elected Republican, and his successor, current President Joe Biden, elected Democrat, have distinctly different attitudes toward the issue of climate change. Trump has often claimed that climate change is a “hoax,” and he notified the

United Nations of his country's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2019 (Matthews, 2017). Later, when Biden became the 46th president of the United States in January 2021, he signed 17 Executive Orders at the White House on his first day in office, including a return to the Paris Agreement. His action indicates that addressing climate change is one of the central issues for the Biden administration. Political parties' attitudes toward climate change are bifurcated, and there is consistency in the president's party of origin and attitudes toward climate change going back to presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama in the 2000s. On the other hand, there is some uncertainty about the differences in climate action due to religious values, which complicates the culture wars clash as much as politics does. Trump is a member of the Presbyterian Church, and it has long been noted that the Republican Party's largest base of support is evangelical Christians.<sup>1)</sup> In contrast, Biden is a member of the Catholic Church, while the Democratic electorate comes from various religious backgrounds. Despite their denominational differences, both are Christians. It is commonly pointed out that evangelical Christians are the largest base of support for the Republican Party, but then, do evangelical religious values have any influence on the climate change policies of the Republican Party? Conversely, can a particular Christian denomination influence the policies of the Democratic Party?

To examine the above questions, this paper analyzes and discusses the following three points: the Biblical passages that provide evidence for Christians who question the view that climate change is anthropogenic; the connections certain Christian denominations have with politics; and the kinds of statements major Christian denominations in the United States issue on climate change.

## 2. Literature Review

Ever since White stirred up controversy in 1967 by publishing a paper that attributed environmental problems to religion, scholarly interest in the relationships between religions and environments has been growing, not only among scholars of religious studies and theologians, but also among philosophers who have been cultivating the field of environmental ethics (Benson, 2000; Deane-Drummond & Strohm, 2011; Taylor, 2005). Around the 1990s, religion and ecology

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1) Although the term "evangelical" has many definitions, the Barna Group survey results used in this paper define evangelicals as follows: Evangelicals are the Christians who have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, plus seven other conditions. These conditions include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "evangelical." (Religious Beliefs Have Greatest Influence on Voting Decisions, 2016).

generated a large body of scholarship as a field of study (Anderson, 2012; Birch et al., 1990; Gottlieb, 2006). One intriguing outcome of the dispute White's essay provoked was the emergence of new subgenres in theology, such as ecotheology, ecofeminism, and ecojustice (Elizabeth, 1993, 2014; Gebara, 1999; Habel, 2009; Hessel & Ruether, 2000; Ruether, 1992). In the context of growing environmental awareness, biblical scholars have been working to move beyond human-focused perspectives and to reread the Bible with a deliberate sympathy for all created things (Bauckham, 2010; Conradie, 2006; Horrell, 2010; Horrell et al., 2010; Rossing, 2010).

The Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions' "Religion and Ecology" series, launched in 1996, helped establish an interdisciplinary dialogue on the environmental crisis. The series carried out ten conferences at Harvard and the United Nations, led by notable scholars in the field, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Allen Grim. Ten volumes came out of the conferences and they were distributed by Harvard University Press. The volumes are generally considered the genesis of the religion-ecology field, examining the ecological implications of various world religions' beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and doctrines. Today, more than 260 scholars in the United States and a network of 8,000 people around the world explore these converging perspectives (Palmer, 2012). The study of religion and ecology at Harvard University resulted in the formation of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, with Tucker and Grim as the co-founder and co-director. The forum observes that the study of religion and ecology has grown into an academic field that engages in dialogue with other disciplines in seeking comprehensive solutions to both global and local environmental problems. Nowadays, several journals focus on the area, including *Worldviews: Religion, Culture, Environment, Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*, the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*, and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.

The United Nations has also begun to focus on the role of religious organizations in environmental protection. For example, in October 2020, the UN Environment Programme released *Faith Action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Outlook*, which reports on many examples of how religious organizations are contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The report pointed out that the potential influence of religious organizations on protecting the natural environment is immense because they own 11% of the habitable land and 5% of the commercial forests on the planet. It also gives the specific example that if 70% of Catholic congregations planted an average of three trees, they could absorb 10,000,000 pounds (about 4,540,000 kg) of carbon every year (*Faith Action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Outlook*, n.d.).

### **3. Biblical Passages Upon Which Climate Change Skepticism Is Based**

The religious community's response to the increasing concern about the relationship between people and the environment has been vast and varied. Regarding the theological perspective, the

central concern is collected around the account of “the beginning” in Genesis and “the end” in Revelation.

### “The Beginning” in Genesis

The modern interpretation of Genesis 1:26-30 and the apparent anthropocentric understandings in the passage, such as “let them (humankind) have dominion (over nature)” and “subdue it,” are considered a hindrance to Christians’—especially those who believe in the infallibility of the Bible—concern for the environment.<sup>2)</sup> The interpretation of “dominion” has historically divided Christians into those who interpret the word as meaning that humans have absolute command over all things on the planet and those who understand it as the need for believers to take responsible stewardship of the environment.

Francis Schaeffer, an evangelical Christian thinker who wrote *Pollution and the Death of Man* in 1970 to deny that environmental problems stemmed from Christianity and its anthropocentric views, was among the first to respond to White’s essay by using the term “stewardship.” He indicated that humans were created in “the image of God” and were therefore given sole “dominion” over nature. By using “dominion,” however, Schaeffer accentuated that this term does not mean that people are entitled to exploit nature as they wish but should instead exercise dominion under God’s domain as stewards. This strand of Christian environmental thought became known as the stewardship school, which is opposite to the dominion exegesis. In addition to Schaeffer, other scholars supported White’s hypothesis that Christians were more likely to accept the notion of rightful human use of nature, and they assumed that such attitudes indicated low environmental concern and would motivate negative environmental behavior (Hand & Van Liere, 1984; Weigel, 1977).

The other part in question in Genesis is God’s command to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). This passage is commonly used as grounds in more traditional Christian circles to have many children and to prohibit birth control, especially among members of the Catholic Church. Although overpopulation is one of our most severe problems and causes many of our challenges today, for those who abide by this passage in the literal sense, the current explosive growth in population is not something that can be solved.

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2) Genesis 1:26-30: 26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” 29 God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

## “The End” in Revelation

Bill Moyers (2005, 2001), an environmental journalist, alleged that the antienvironmental predilections of some people in America are rooted in a literal and exploitative interpretation of the Bible and that evangelical and fundamentalist Christian beliefs foster widespread complacency regarding environmental protection in relation to “end times.”

As Moyers suggested, the conservative Christian eschatologies or views of the “end times” are probably some of the most influential factors that affect attitudes toward the environment (Boyd, 1999; Curry-Roper, 1990; Guth et al., 1995). Conservative eschatologies teach that believers will be “caught up in the clouds” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)<sup>3)</sup> or “raptured,”<sup>4)</sup> which would exempt devout Christians from the tribulation when Jesus Christ returned to Earth. Christians who adhere to this theology are often watchful of signs of the “end times,” such as large-scale wars (Matthew 24:7; Revelation 6:4), great earthquakes (Luke 21:11), the roaring of the sea and the waves (Luke 21:25), famine (Matthew 24:7; Revelation 6:5-6), and plagues (Luke 21:11). These events are regarded as the signs of the “end times” and they mark the second coming of Christ. Because Christ will both cause and restore the chaos, all these signs of crisis can be downplayed as “birth pangs” (Matthew 24:8). Under such an eschatological view, worrying about environmental degradation is pointless because Christ has doomed the Earth we know to be scrapped and built again. Theologian Janel Curry (2008) argued that this sort of eschatology focuses more on personal salvation rather than on being saved as a community, which leads to individualism.

It puts an emphasis on Christ as the personal savior of individual humans with the earth serving as a backdrop in this salvation story. Individuals—not communities—are the center of its religious story, and the earth is the stage on which these individual lives are played, rather than something of eternal, central concern. . . . This American worldview includes being utilitarian in its views of nature, supporting individual property rights, being against government interference with individual rights, and emphasizing the market. (158-159)

In general, Protestant Christians take the Bible alone as their norm, and those Christians who are considered “conservative” in particular take the position of biblical infallibility, which holds that

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3) 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17: 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

4) The rapture is an eschatological concept of certain Christians, particularly within branches of American evangelicalism, consisting of an end time event when all Christian believers who are alive will rise along with the resurrected dead believers into heaven and join Christ.

the Bible is completely without error. Some who hold this position believe that the world as it is now will end with the second coming of Jesus Christ, because they believe history begins with creation and ceases at the end of time, according to the Bible. In contrast, liberal Christian eschatologies have a more evolutionary or progressive view of how the future will unfold. Most liberal mainline churches see continuity between this material world and the future perfected heaven on Earth that will be established when Christ returns. In this kind of eschatological view, the second coming of Christ is not associated with a fear of the “end times” but is seen as a hope for humans and the Earth. Consequently, this present Earth is seen as a nondiscardable living environment.

Regardless of whether conservative or liberal, nobody knows what the future will unfold, especially at a practical level. If only selected Christian elites are raptured when Christ returns to Earth, what are the criteria by which to be chosen? What is going to happen to the planet and the animals during the tribulation? How and where would saved Christians live after the trial? On the other hand, if the dead would all rise again upon Christ’s return to the current Earth, how could the Earth accommodate all of those who died during the last 2,000 years? Although these questions may seem wildly preposterous from the perspective of non-Christians, one has to keep in mind that 30% of the Earth’s population of 7,300,000,000 people believe in Christianity, and their views on the “end times” closely relate to the treatment of our environment. Environmentalists will need to pay attention to Christian values if they are to ask people to address climate change truthfully and transform their behavior to preserve the global environment.

#### **4. Correlations Between Christian Denominations and the Political Parties**

As a matter of course, Christianity is not the only culprit regarding the current environmental problems. In contrast to White and other scholars who focused on the role of Christianity in shaping attitudes toward nature, Moncrief (1970), a professor at Michigan State University’s agricultural business department, suggested that social and personal values (e.g., democratization, materialism, secularization, individualism, and utilitarianism) play a greater role in shaping attitudes toward nature than the influence of Christianity does. He argued that many causes guide the emergence of the modern precarious environmental situation and that Christianity is not as dominant as other factors (Moncrief, 1970). In a similar vein, Shaiko (1987) factored political ideologies into his analysis of environmental and religious variables. He discovered that when political views were factored in, the influence of religious variables on environmental attitudes declined.

Taking the current political climate in the United States into consideration, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication has published numerous research outcomes that focus on the factors that shape attitudes toward the environment. The quantitative survey, which sampled 1,204 American adults in March 2016, suggested that the debate is not about whether religion or politics



has stronger factors in shaping attitudes toward the environment but rather how multiple factors are intertwined. The survey contained four questions: (a) Do you think God controls the climate and thus people cannot be the cause of global warming? (b) Do you think global warming is a sign of the “end times”? (c) Do you think the “end times” are coming and that we do not need to worry about global warming? (e) Do you think the apocalypse will happen in your lifetime? The results showed 15% of Americans think God controls the climate, and that as a result, people cannot be the cause of global warming; 14% of Americans think global warming is a sign of the “end times”; 11% of Americans think the “end times” are coming and that they do not need to worry about global warming; and 9% of Americans think the apocalypse will happen in their lifetime. The 11% who believe the “end times” are coming and that people do not need to worry about global warming identified themselves in the following categories when given in multiple choices (Roser-Renouf et al., 2016):

- Evangelicals and born-again Christians (26%)
- Conservative Republicans (21%)
- Republicans (19%)
- Tea Party members (18%)
- Adults who have not completed high school (18%)
- People who do not believe that humans evolved from earlier species (18%)
- Registered voters who support Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (18%)
- People who believe that the Earth was created in six days, as described in the Bible (17%)
- People with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 (17%)
- African Americans (16%)
- People aged 30-44 (15%)
- Moderate/Liberal Republicans (15%)

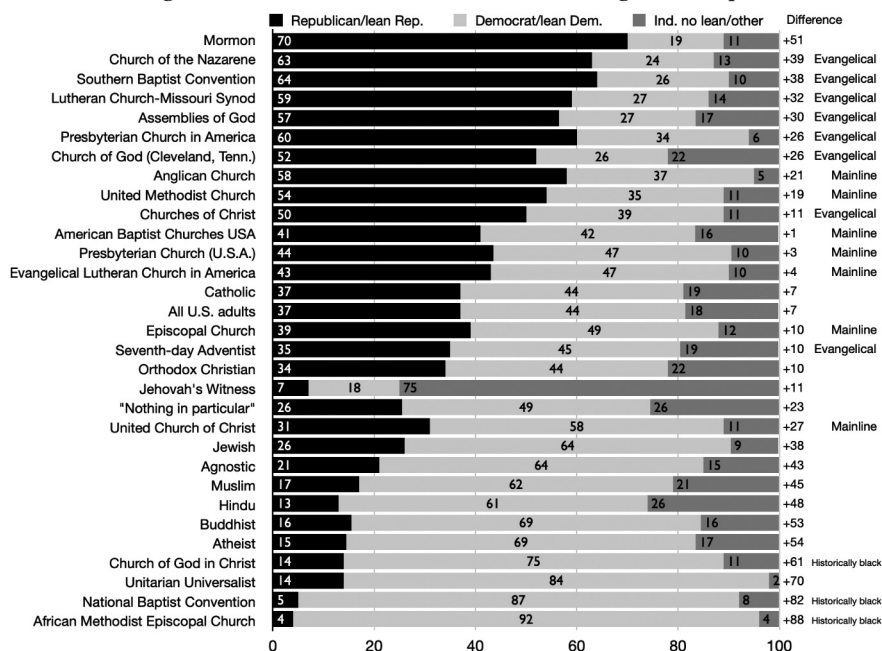
The results show that for some Americans, the causes and meaning of climate change are seen through the lens of their religious beliefs, and some people believe they do not need to worry about climate change in light of the approaching apocalypse. The survey also supports the popular belief in correlation among political party affiliation, religious beliefs, and attitude toward climate change.

A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center identified which Christians support which political party (Figure 1).<sup>5)</sup> The right-hand side of the graph categorizes denominations belonging to Protestantism as evangelical, mainline, and historically Black churches. As the graph shows,

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5) The graph was generated with some modifications by the author based on the one posted on the Pew Research Center’s website (Lipka, 2016). Although the article was published in 2016, the statistical survey was conducted in 2014. Thus, the figures are prior to the 2016 presidential election.

**Figure 1 The Political Preferences of U.S. Religious Groups**



Note. % of U.S. adults in each group who lean toward or identify with the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, or another party/no lean (Lipka, 2016).

many Christians who belong to the evangelical denomination tend to support the Republican Party. The United Church of Christ (UCC), which is considered a typical liberal denomination, tends to support the Democratic Party rather than the Republican Party, with 31% supporting the Republican Party, 58% supporting the Democratic Party, and 11% supporting independent candidates or those with no preference.

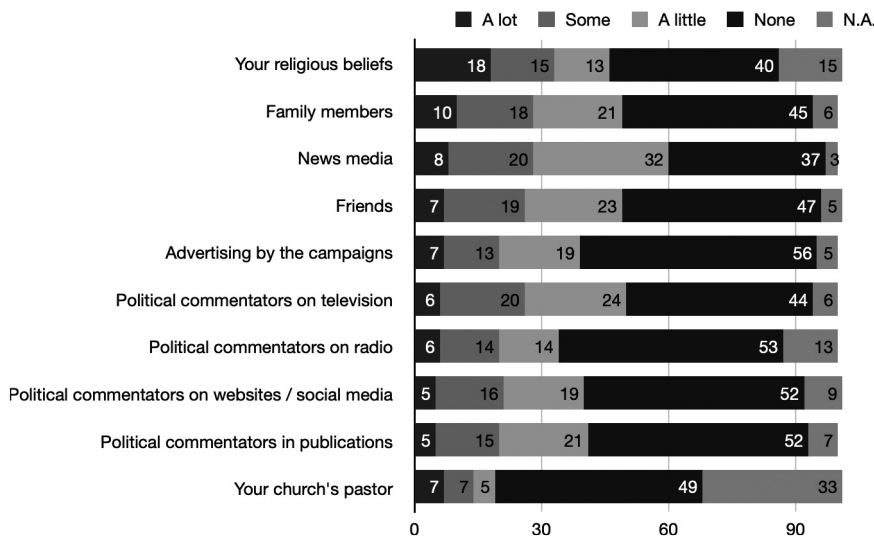
Barna Group's (2016) statistical study looked at influences on Americans' voting behavior (Figure 2).<sup>6)</sup> The survey found that 18% of Americans say the values of their religious beliefs influence their political decisions, followed by family members (10%). The other eight sources examined fall within the 5-8% range. It seems only 14% of adults are influenced by their pastors. According to Barna Group, however, when those who do not have someone they consider to be their pastor were eliminated from consideration, then pastors were tied with the other four sources as the lowest-ranked influence, impacting about 20% of adults. Thus, in the United States, churches and pastors seem to influence the voting behavior of the Christians in no small way.

Supporting the above two findings, a Pew Research Center (2020) survey showed a unique association between specific denominations and party support in presidential elections (Figure 3).<sup>7)</sup>

6) The graph was generated with some modifications by the author based on the one posted on the Barna Group's website (Religious Beliefs Have Greatest Influence on Voting Decisions, 2016).

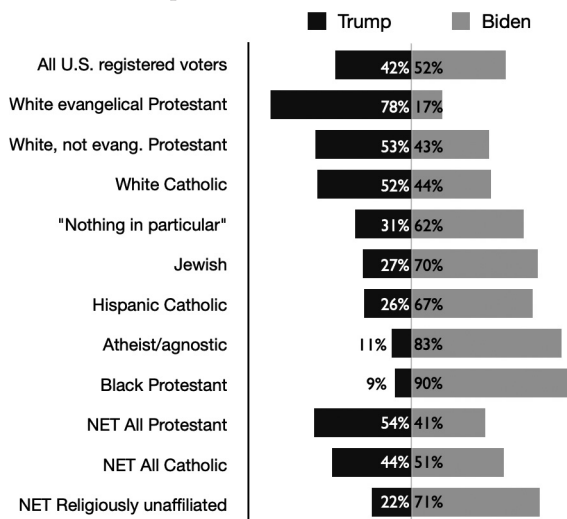
7) The graph was generated with some modifications by the author based on the one posted on the Pew Research Center's website (Smith, 2020).

**Figure 2 Religious Beliefs Have Greatest Influence on Voting Decisions**



Note. % of U.S. adults in source of political influence, 18+, n = 1,023  
(Religious Beliefs Have Greatest Influence on Voting Decisions, 2016).

**Figure 3 In 2020 Election, Deep Divisions Between White Christians and Everyone Else**



Note. % of registered voters who would vote/lean toward voting for \_\_\_ if the election were today (Smith, 2020).

One noteworthy result is that 78% of White evangelicals supported Trump. In addition, non-White Christians, including Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants, generally supported Biden. Atheists and agnostics also tended to support Biden by an overwhelming majority. Interestingly, Biden, a Catholic presidential candidate, received a majority of support from Catholics (51%), but 44% of the vote went to Trump. The reason for this result is probably that even though 67% of

Hispanic Catholics supported Biden, 52% of White Catholics supported Trump, which affected the overall Catholic vote.

In addition, another Pew Research Center study in 2020 examined the relationship between climate change awareness and voting behavior among the electorate (Tyson, 2020). The survey asked voters whether each presidential candidate's stance on climate change was important to them in the 2020 presidential election. Sixty-eight percent of Biden supporters answered that climate change was very important, whereas 23% answered it was somewhat important. In contrast, only 11% of Trump supporters answered that climate change was very important, whereas 29% said it was somewhat important. In other words, 91% of Biden supporters considered the climate change issue to be important, compared to 40% of Trump supporters.

As the results show, there seems to be a correlation in the United States between awareness of climate change, the political party people support, and the Christian denomination to which they belong. As is commonly believed, White evangelical Christians are more likely to support the Republican Party, and Republican supporters seem to place less emphasis on the presidential candidates' stance on climate change policy. On the other hand, Democratic supporters are more diverse, with many non-White Christians voting and placing more emphasis on the presidential candidates' stance on climate change.

## **5. Statements of Major Christian Denominations on Climate Change**

Various churches adopted statements and resolutions after climate change and environmental issues became the subject of social debate. To learn more about the understanding of climate change among those who belong to specific denominations in the United States, specific statements issued by churches representing the so-called conservative Protestant denominations, liberal Protestant denominations, and Catholics, respectively, will be discussed and analyzed in this section. As for the so-called conservative Protestants, I analyze the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC; 2006) "On Environmentalism and Evangelicals" resolution, which is regarded as representative of evangelicals' views, is used in the analysis. For liberal Protestants, I examine the United Church of Christ's (2015) resolution called "Resolution Urging Divestment—Along With Other Strategies—From Fossil Fuel Companies to Address Climate Change." Moreover, I analyze the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (2001) "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good" for the Catholic Church. These three churches were chosen because of their large numbers of members among the American Christian population or because of their significant influence on society as long-established churches.

### **Southern Baptist Convention's "On Environmentalism and Evangelicals"**

The SBC is the second-largest Christian denomination in the United States, with approximately 15,000,000 members representing 5.3% of all Christians in the United States. The

following is a summary of the resolution “On Environmentalism and Evangelicals,” which sets forth the evangelicals’ stance on the natural environment (2006).

First, the resolution holds the view that human beings have special status as created in the image of God and that they are called to care for the other creations of God. It states “due to the superiority of human beings, we have been given domination over the Earth and environment (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8).” The SBC’s concern was that some environmentalists in the United States have completely rejected “God the Father” in favor of deifying “Mother Earth” and have elevated animal and plant life to a place equal to or of greater value than human life, which leads environmentalism into a neopagan religion. Furthermore, although scientists involved in international organizations such as the IPCC have reached a consensus that climate change is caused by anthropogenic activities, the SBC does not pander to this consensus. The resolution states that the scientific community is still divided on the effects of humankind’s influence on the environment and that some environmental activists seek to advance a political agenda based on disputed claims.

Although the resolution supports public policy and private enterprise efforts that seek to improve the environment based on sound scientific and technological research, it rejects alliances with “extreme environmental groups” whose positions contradict biblical principles (2 Chronicles 19:2) and it opposes solutions based on “questionable science, which bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily restrict economic development.” Finally, the resolution concludes by emphasizing the new heaven and new Earth that will come with the second coming of Jesus Christ as described in the Book of Revelation.

### **United Church of Christ’s “Resolution Urging Divestment—Along With Other Strategies—From Fossil Fuel Companies to Address Climate Change”**

The UCC is a mainline Protestant Christian denomination with historical and confessional roots in the Congregational, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Anabaptist traditions. The UCC’s roots can be traced back to the New England Puritans who came to America from Europe in the earliest days. Today, the UCC has a dwindling membership, with approximately 770,000 members, representing 0.4% of all Christians in the United States. Former President Barack Obama is also a member of the UCC. Although membership is declining, the UCC’s influence on society is significant. The church has long been involved in the abolitionism movement, has recently been advocating for racial and gender equality, and is highly concerned about social issues. Due to the high social interest, the church is also highly committed to environmental issues such as climate change. The following is a summary of the resolution published by the UCC in 2013 called “Resolution Urging Divestment—Along With Other Strategies—From Fossil Fuel Companies to Address Climate Change” (General Synod 29, 2013).

First, the general synod of the UCC suggested its members make lifestyle changes to reduce

the use of fossil fuels in their lives, homes, businesses and churches. Then, the UCC encouraged its member to demand action from legislators and advocate for the creation and enforcement of carbon-reducing laws. It then suggested specific political actions to be taken. For example,

Make shareholder engagement on climate change an immediate, top priority for the next five years by: demanding transparency regarding climate change legislation lobbying; insisting that companies' operations and products conform to achieve the goal of scientifically understood safe levels of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane, and requiring companies to examine and disclose their carbon assets that are at risk of being stranded in the event of a carbon tax or some other executive or legislative action. (General Synod 29, 2013)

Other aspects of the resolution include the need for research, asking individual churches to report on the activities they have undertaken to protect the environment, and cooperation with other religions.

An interesting point is that it does not raise any questions about climate science and immediately begins by proposing a solution. In addition, there is little mention of God or the Bible, and no biblical passages are presented as in the SBC resolution presented earlier. Another noteworthy point is that the resolution concludes with a reference to the disparities caused by climate change, as is appropriate for a church that is concerned with social issues. The resolution states UCC's general synod has concerns about the disproportionate effect climate change is already having on those "living in poverty and in the least developed countries, the elderly and children and those least responsible for the emissions of greenhouse gases." The resolution then describes the moral mandate that human beings should attain by shifting to a sustainable energy plan that is both "just and compassionate."

### **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good"**

In the United States, the roughly 51,000,000 Catholics represent 21% of all Christians. Catholic believers are becoming increasingly environmentally conscious each year because Pope Francis has frequently stated in various places (including at the UN Climate Action Summit 2019) that Catholics should be more proactive on environmental issues. In particular, his encyclical, "*Laudato Si: Caring for the Home Together*," which he issued in 2015 to the 1,320,000,000 Catholics worldwide, has had a significant global influence.<sup>8)</sup> The Pope's message has helped

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8) A papal encyclical is a letter issued by the Pope to the worldwide Catholic Church with the intention of guiding the faithful to a righteous life of faith. Traditionally, they have been addressed to bishops and other ecclesiastical authorities, but recently they have been published as books and are available on the Vatican's website in various languages.

spread awareness that the global environmental crisis, including climate change, is a central issue to be addressed by the Church around the world. Since the publication of “*Laudato Si*,” various Christian research institutions have discussed the significance of the encyclical today, and Catholic educational institutions, churches, and congregations in particular have already begun to work on ways to put the teachings of the encyclical into practice in their daily lives (Kubo, 2020). Even before the Pope’s 2015 encyclical, Catholics showed a high level of interest in climate change issues, as evidenced by a 2001 document published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good” (Fay, 2001).

The document is 11 pages—longer than any other document on climate change by other denominations—and provides footnotes with evidence for its claims. The USCCB stated in the beginning that the debate on global climate change seems polarized and partisan. Interestingly, Catholics accept the scientific consensus with open arms. The USCCB agreed with the scientific research that suggests human behavior and activity are contributing to a warming of the Earth’s climate. They stated, “As Catholic bishops, we make no independent judgment on the plausibility of the warming of the earth” (Fay, 2001). Rather, the USCCB accepted the consensus findings of so many scientists and the conclusions of the IPCC as a basis for continued research and prudent action. The document acknowledged that the major factors that contribute to climate change are the emissions from cars and trucks, industry and electric plants, businesses and deforestation.

Moreover, the USCCB expressed that actions to mitigate climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on developing nations. The USCCB also claimed that severity, or geographical distribution of global warming impacts, is expected to affect the poor, the vulnerable, and generations yet unborn disproportionately. The USCCB continued,

Projected sea level rises could impact low-lying coastal areas in densely populated nations of the developing world. Storms are most likely to strain the fragile housing infrastructure of the poorest nations. The migration of diseases could further challenge the presently inadequate health care systems of these same nations. Droughts or floods, it is feared, will afflict regions already too often hit by famine, hunger, and malnutrition. Because the number of days with high heat and humidity are likely to increase, heat stress impacts will also increase, especially among the elderly, the sick, children, and the poor.

The USCCB concluded by reaffirming the IPCC’s view that climate change is caused by anthropogenic activities. Overall, the USCCB’s document has the deepest understanding of the natural environment, and USCCB is more appropriately well-versed in issues such as climate

science and climate justice than any other church.

The next section outlines the religious beliefs that influence the stance on climate change and examines the denominational differences in three areas: attitudes toward climate science, beliefs regarding the root cause of climate change, and beliefs regarding the need for public policy. To clarify the differences in attitudes toward climate change, the political position of each church can be roughly described as follows: the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which is politically right leaning; the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which is somewhat more centrist to right leaning; and the United Church of Christ (UCC), which is politically left leaning.

### **Climate Science**

Although the SBC states, “we encourage public policy and private enterprise efforts that seek to improve the environment based on sound scientific and technological research,” it also makes it clear that “the scientific community is divided on the effects of mankind’s impact on the environment.” From this perspective, the SBC oppose solutions based on “questionable science, which bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily restrict economic development, resulting in less economic opportunity for our poorest citizens.”

The USCCB acknowledges that “some uncertainty remains” in science but carefully chooses its words and states that “human behavior and activity are, according to the most recent findings of the international scientific bodies charged with assessing climate change, contributing to a warming of the Earth’s climate.” Additionally, it states that the Church will “make no independent judgment on the plausibility of ‘global warming’” and accepts the scientific consensus derived by international organizations such as the IPCC.

The UCC seems to have full confidence in climate science. Its resolution encourages divestment from fossil fuel companies, urging the members of UCC to continue researching to determine which companies’ practices are best. Moreover, it states that the research process “should be conducted on a periodic basis and the research metrics used should continually reference the newest climate science as a permanent way to analyze fossil fuel companies,” which suggests trusting and referring to the findings of secular climate science.

### **The Root Cause of Climate Change**

The SBC views climate change as the result of depravity due to moral sin, not anthropogenic practices such as economic activity. Regarding sin, the SBC states that “mankind as free moral agents willfully disobeyed God, plunging the whole creation into corruption because of our sin (Genesis 3:1-19), and since the fall into sin, humans have often ignored the Creator, shirked their stewardship of the environment, and further defiled the good creation.” Thus, it is clear that the SBC considers the phenomenon of climate change to be a result of sin.

The USCCB seems to have the most knowledge about climate change and its root causes.



Despite being written as early as 2001, its document describes the mechanism of global warming and the sources of greenhouse gases in considerable detail. The following is a quote from the document:

An increase in the relative abundance of the greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbons, tropospheric ozone, and nitrous oxide) causes the earth to trap more of the Sun's heat, resulting in what is called "global warming." What causes greenhouse gases to accumulate in the atmosphere? Emissions from cars and trucks, industry and electric plants, and businesses and homes are the largest part of the answer, although other factors such as deforestation contribute. The Industrial Revolution was built on furnaces and engines burning fossil fuels (coal, natural gas, oil, and such derived products as gasoline and heating oil).

The UCC's resolution does not describe in detail the mechanisms of climate change because of its focus on encouraging concrete changes in behavior. However, it does seem to consider fossil fuels, methane, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as the causes of climate change, as it urges the reduction of these emissions.

### **Public Policy**

The SBC, although cautious that "some environmental activists are seeking to advance a political agenda based on disputed claims," encourages public policy and private enterprise efforts that seek to improve the environment based on "sound scientific and technological research." However, it is unclear what "sound" science means in the context of the SBC's religious values.

The USCCB urges that within the United States, public policy should support industrial sectors and workers who are particularly affected by climate change policies. It also recommend providing incentives for businesses to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide support for workers who are affected by these policies. The USCCB goes on to state that it hopes for continued dialogue within and among the diverse disciplines of science, economics, politics, and diplomacy. Moreover, it states that the core value of the collaboration among the various disciplines should be based on fundamental moral values, such as the universal common good, respect for God's creation, the option for the poor, and a sense of intergenerational obligation. Thus, the USCCB's document is unique in its balanced description of specific policy demands and religious beliefs.

The UCC clearly recognizes the importance of public policy. In particular, because the resolution exhorts church members to take practical action rather than simply publishing a declaration based on religious beliefs for the world to see, the proposal is also specific. The following is what the UCC urges:

Make shareholder engagement on climate change an immediate, top priority for the next five years by demanding transparency regarding climate change legislation lobbying, insisting that companies' operations and products conform to achieve the goal of scientifically understood safe levels of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane, and requiring companies to examine and disclose their carbon assets that are at risk of being stranded in the event of a carbon tax or some other executive or legislative action.

As can be seen from these analyses and the graphs in the previous section, there is a certain degree of connection among denominations' religious values, their attitudes toward climate change, and the political parties they support. The resolution of the SBC, which has a large number of Republican-supporting congregations, is faith-oriented and focused on religious values, such as expressing concern about nature worship. The Catholic vote is split in the 2020 presidential election, and as the USCCB document shows, the Catholic Church is trying to somehow maintain a balance. Because it has a large congregation and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it will be challenging for the Catholic Church to discuss climate change while still taking each group into consideration. Overall, the USCCB's document on climate change is generally well-researched. Furthermore, although it acknowledges climate science's uncertainties, it encourages the Catholics to continue to dialogue with scientists and to act in the global environment's best interests. Because the UCC's resolution was issued as recently as 2015, the explanation of how climate change works and arguments on whether or not to have confidence in climate science have already been passed over and omitted. Rather than issuing such a theoretical declarative statement, the resolution was issued to call on Christians to take concrete action. The graph of figure 1 in the previous section shows that 31% of the UCC congregation supported the Republicans and 58% supported the Democrats in the 2014 election; it is a natural consequence that UCC members who are concerned about climate change tend to vote for the Democrats (now led by Biden), who are passionate about climate change policy.

## 6. Conclusion

Christian values either negatively or positively weigh in on environmental issues. As Lynn White Jr. pointed out in 1967, some Christian ways of reading the Bible could lead to skepticism toward the anthropogenic cause of climate change. Indeed, the norm for Protestant Christians has been by scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) since the Reformation. It means that Christians who read the Bible literally will have a linear view of history that begins with the creation in Genesis and ends with the apocalypse in Revelation. If the events described in the Book of Revelation are fulfilled with the second coming of Jesus Christ, it is not surprising that some Christians see the end of the Earth as the completion of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it is not surprising that some Christians do not subscribe to the scientific consensus, and it is not surprising that climate

change skeptics are particularly prominent in the United States, where there is a large Protestant population. Suppose environmentalists want the U.S., the world's second-largest carbon dioxide emitter, to reduce its emissions somehow, they will need to understand the American people's religious values fully.

In Section 5 of this paper, three distinct churches in the United States were analyzed for their understanding of climate change, and it is worth mentioning that their positions as conservative, moderate, and liberal were clearly presented. These stances were also correlated with the statistical data presented in Section 4. It was particularly interesting to note that the resolution of the SBC, the largest faction of Christians known as evangelicals, revealed that they have some reservations against climate science and are cautious of environmental protection that may lead to worshipping the "Mother Earth." On the contrary, the UCC, which represents the liberal camp, seemed to have no doubts regarding climate science and instead regarded the scientifically revealed data as important information for determining the church's future, including its investments. Although the SBC and UCC are Protestant, a correlation with climate change understanding was also found in that the two Protestant groups are diametrically opposed in their party support, with the SBC supporting the Republican Party and the UCC supporting the Democratic Party. As for Catholics, although Pope Francis is passionate about addressing the issues of climate change and other environmental problems, a certain number of votes will probably go to the conservative-leaning Republicans since Catholics are doctrinally opposed to abortion.

Of course, this paper could only focus on three churches due to space limitations. More churches will need to be examined to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between climate change perceptions, politics, and religion in the United States. In any case, climate change is a global problem, and if religion is the basis for skepticism, then religion is also the key to its solution.

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