

USA: The religious right in climate science denial

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The religious right in the US backs GOP climate change denial because science also supports evolution against creationism.

Now that Sandy has exacted a steep toll in lives and property, the question is unavoidable: why do so many people in America refuse to take climate science seriously?

I am not assuming that Sandy was the direct consequence of human-caused climate change. But with this fresh evidence of the impact of climate issues on real people, how is it possible for anyone to think that thousands of scientists around the world are engaged in an elaborate hoax?

The standard reply is that some powerful organizations – above all, in the fossil fuel industry – think that they can benefit from misleading the public, and have funded a successful disinformation campaign. There is a lot of truth to this answer, but it isn't the whole truth.

For the average climate science denier in the street (and there are a lot of them on some streets), there is often little correlation between the vehemence of their denials and the so-called “facts” at their disposal. The average Chuck is like Chuck Norris, who has claimed that climate science is a “trick”. Not an innocent mistake, not a systemic bias, but a premeditated fraud.

Climate science denial needs disinformation to survive, but it has its feet firmly planted in a part of American culture. That culture draws on lots of different sources. But if you want to understand it, you need to understand something about America's religious landscape.

Take a look at some of the most recent initiatives in the climate science denial wars. In Louisiana, Tennessee, New Hampshire and other states, legislatures have either passed or put forward bills intended to disinform secondary-school students about climate science. Sure, they paper over the assault on education with claims that they only want to teach “both sides” of the issue and encourage “critical thinking”. But, as leaked documents made clear in at least one instance, the ultimate purpose is to produce a young generation of “skeptics” whose views on climate science will happily coincide with those of the fossil fuel industry.

Who is behind these programs of de-education?

The group writing much of the legislation is the American Legislative Exchange Council (Alec), a “nonpartisan” consortium of state legislators and business interests that gets plenty of money from the usual suspects. But the legislation has also received vital support from groups associated with the religious right. For example, the perversely named Louisiana Science Education Act, which opens the door to climate science denial in the classroom, was co-authored by the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based creationist thinktank. That act also received crucial support from the Alliance Defending Freedom, the well-funded Christian legal advocacy group that has described itself as “a servant organization that provides the resources that will keep the door open for the

spread of the Gospel”, and which promotes a radical religious agenda in public schools.

What does religion have to do with climate science? Radical religious activists promote the anti-science bills, in part, because they also seek to undermine the teaching of evolution – another issue that supposedly has “two sides”, so schools should “teach the controversy”. Now, you don’t have to believe that Earth was created in six hectic days in order to be skeptical about climate science, but a large number of climate science deniers also happen to be evolution deniers.

What exactly is the theology of climate science denial? The Cornwall Alliance – a coalition whose list of signatories could double as a directory of major players in the religious right – has produced a declaration asserting, as a matter of theology, that “there is no convincing scientific evidence that human contribution to greenhouse gases is causing dangerous global warming.”

It also tells us – on the firm foundation of Holy Scriptures – that policies intended to slow the pace of climate change represent a “dangerous expansion of government control over private life”. It also alerts us that the environmental movement is “un-Biblical” – indeed, a new and false religion. If the Cornwall Declaration seems like a tough read, you can get what you need from the organization’s DVD series: “Resisting the Green Dragon: A Biblical Response to one of the Greatest Deceptions of our Day.”

Now, this isn’t the theology of every religion in America, or of every strain of Christianity; not by a long stretch. Most Christians accept climate science and believe in protecting the environment, and many of them do so for religious as well as scientific reasons. But theirs is not the theology that holds sway in the upper reaches of the Republican party, or moves your average climate science denier Chuck. As Rick Santorum explained at an energy summit in Colorado:

“We were put on this Earth as creatures of God to have dominion over the Earth ... for our benefit not for the Earth’s benefit.”

Why does this theology of science denial have such power? For one thing, it gives its adherents something to throw back in the face of all those obnoxious “elites”, which they think are telling them what to do with their lives. There’s no need to master the facts if all you need is to learn a few words of scripture.

But, perhaps, more to the point is that this kind of religion works for Chuck because it allows him to disguise the extraordinary selfishness of his position in a cloak of sanctimony. Translated into the kind of language that you can take to the shopping mall, it says that God wants you to squeeze whatever you can out of the earth – and to hell with the grandkids.

I hear plenty of cynicism about the choice facing people this Tuesday, 6 November. Some say that it really doesn’t matter who gets elected. It is true that Obama has largely kept climate change out of the campaign. But it is delusional to imagine that Obama is just the same as Romney and the Republican party on this issue. Paul Ryan is on record as a world-class climate science denier. Mitt Romney’s press secretary has been a shill for oil companies.

Romney’s proposals on energy policy and climate issues, so far as they can be discerned, are indistinguishable from those of the fossil fuel industry. And anyone who thinks that Republican party policies won’t be informed by some of that old-time religion simply hasn’t been listening to what its candidates have to say about women, reproductive rights, and what they speciously call “religious liberty”.

There is a choice. And even if you don’t think it matters, your grandkids will.

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P.S.

* The Guardian, 4 November 2012.