

Religious Views on Climate Change Mitigation
Jonas Siegel, Research Associate (jsiegel@umd.edu)
Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland

Abstract

A December 2011 public opinion study by the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and its affiliate, the Program on International Policy Attitudes, found that the religious and moral beliefs of a majority of Americans can lead them to directly or indirectly prefer policies that would address threats to the environment and mitigate the effects of global climate change. Yet, the study also confirmed how few believers initially think of climate change and other threats to the environment in religious or moral terms. The wide-ranging ways in which questions about environmental issues can be framed could help to explain how believers who don't readily identify addressing environmental threats as spiritual obligations are able to engage these beliefs. Other possible explanations include (1) that Americans think about their religious and moral beliefs more as they apply to people's personal lives than to big-picture, long-term issues such as climate change and/or (2) that spirituality and public policy engage different cognitive modes and that individuals are willing to act out of a moral construct without scientific reason. Based on these survey findings, this paper suggests that finding ways to overcome these obstacles and engage individuals on the basis of their religious and moral beliefs could be an effective way to increase public support for action and policies aimed at mitigating environmental threats, including global climate change.

Introduction

Addressing the risks posed by global climate change will likely require action outside of traditional political channels. One source of the necessary constructive initiative could be religious communities, which have long been involved in matters of public policy.¹ This involvement has been obscured over time to the point that individuals often make decisions based on their religious and moral beliefs without even knowing it.

Recent studies have shed doubt on the ways that religious beliefs can positively influence views on climate change and climate change mitigation, highlighting, for instance, the relatively small amount of influence that religion ostensibly has on individuals' views of environmental laws and regulations and the high degree to which those who are "dismissive" of climate change identify themselves as Evangelical Christians.² Yet little is known about how individuals relate their underlying religious and moral beliefs to particular challenges associated with climate change or how these beliefs affect particular public policy preferences. In addition, little is known about how individuals' religious/spiritual beliefs about climate change relate to their views about other

¹ The research and analysis presented in this paper emerges from a larger Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) project on morality and security that involves CISSM Director John Steinbruner, CISSM Research Director Nancy Gallagher, and CISSM Research Scholar Kevin Jones, each of whom has contributed to the ideas found in this paper.

² Andrew Kohut and Luis Lugo, "Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views," The Pew Research Center, September 17, 2010. This report is drawn from the 2012 Annual Religion and Public Life survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; Anthony Leiserowitz et al., "Global Warning's Six Americas 2009: An Audience Segmentation Analysis," Yale Project on Climate Change, May 20, 2009.

global policy challenges, some of which are intimately intertwined with current and potential effects of climate change.

To begin to better understand how individuals' religious and moral beliefs relate to climate change and how these beliefs ultimately affect their policy preferences, the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) developed and fielded a public opinion survey on the topic in late 2011.³ The survey, which was developed by CISSM and its affiliate, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), was fielded between September 9 and September 19, 2011. The survey sample included 1,496 adult Americans, including an oversample of 330 Catholics, which permitted subgroup analyses.⁴ The survey probed individuals' opinions on a range of subjects, including nuclear weapons policy, global poverty, and environmental challenges. This paper draws mostly from the sections of the survey focused on environmental questions.

As the survey was intended to gather data about how individuals' spiritual beliefs affect their policy preferences, its first task was defining what constituted a "believer." The term "believer" has different meanings in different religious contexts; however, for the purposes of this study, the population of believers was comprised of those who said they "believe in god" and those who said that "there are spiritual obligations to act in certain ways." In total, 89 percent of the surveyed population fit into one or both of these categories.

Understanding spiritual obligations to the environment

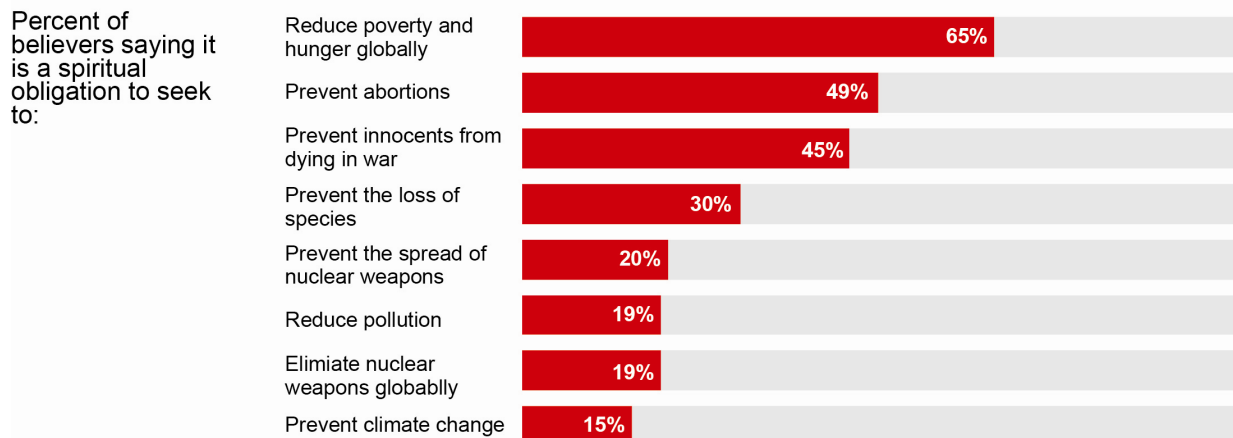
Obligations to the environment in context. To put believers' religious and moral beliefs about climate change and other environmental issues into context, the survey initially asked respondents to choose from a list of public policy issues those that they felt they had a "spiritual obligation" to address (See Figure 1). Not surprisingly, a solid majority (65 percent) of believers saw reducing global poverty and hunger as a spiritual obligation. In comparison, 49 percent of believers saw preventing abortions as a spiritual obligation, and 45 percent saw preventing the deaths of innocent civilians in war as a spiritual obligation. Only twenty percent initially said that they saw preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as a spiritual obligation, and 19 percent said that they felt the same way about the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons.

³ This results of this survey were initially published in December 2011. Steven Kull, John Steinbruner, Nancy Gallagher, Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis, Jonas Siegel, Kevin Jones, and Stefan Subias, "Faith and Global Policy Challenges," CISSM/PIPA/Knowledge Networks, December 2011, available at www.cissm.umd.edu.

⁴ The survey was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The general sample was weighted by age, gender, ethnicity, education, region, urbanization, internet status, and party identification. With a design effect of 1.741, the margin of error for the general population sample is +/- 3.3 percent.

Figure 1

Spiritual obligations to the environment in context



Source: Steven Kull et al., "Faith and Global Policy Challenges," CISSM/PIPA Poll, December 2011.

The number of believers who felt they had a spiritual obligation to address environmental issues was also relatively small. Only 15 percent of believers saw preventing climate change as a spiritual obligation; 19 percent saw reducing pollution as a spiritual obligation; and 30 percent saw preventing the loss of species as a spiritual obligation.

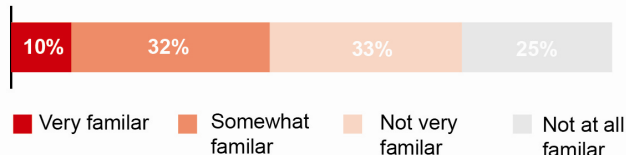
Beliefs on environmental stewardship. Though a dearth of believers identified environmental issues, particularly the need to mitigate the effects of climate change, as spiritual obligations, 43 percent initially said that they were familiar with the religious notion that humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment. After being walked through a few theological arguments for why humans should or should not prioritize environmental stewardship, 73 percent eventually embraced the idea that humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that of this 73 percent of believers, 54 percent said that their obligation to be good stewards of the environment arose from an obligation to protect both humans and nature. The relative ease with which believers understood the connections between their spiritual/religious beliefs and the need for humans to be good stewards of the environment raises some important questions that this paper will address in later sections.

Individual vs. national obligations. The survey asked respondents to evaluate whether they thought countries, particularly the United States, as distinct from individuals, had spiritual obligations to address certain policy issues. The survey prioritized understanding this distinction because addressing specific global policy challenges, such as global climate change, is likely to require international cooperation. It will not be enough for a single country to adopt policies and programs to mitigate climate change, even if that country is a large emitter of greenhouse gases. (The necessity of an international response bound together all of the policy challenges addressed in the survey.) Of the believers surveyed, 26 percent said that they believed the United States has

Figure 2

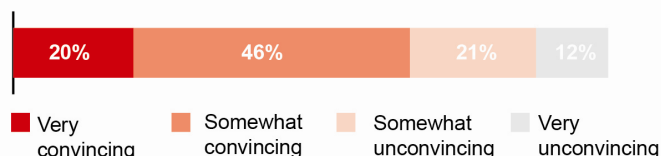
Defining environmental stewardship

- Believers were initially asked how familiar they were with the concept of environmental stewardship.

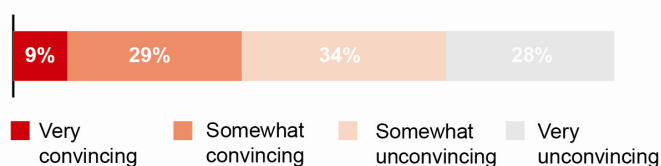


- Believers were then asked to decide whether each of the following arguments were convincing or unconvincing:

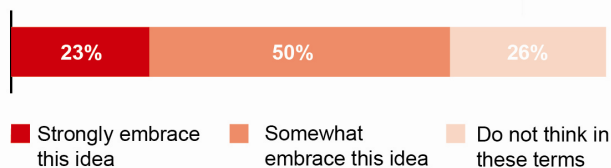
We have a spiritual obligation to be responsible stewards of God's creation in our actions, and to support those with a spiritual calling to work to protect the environment. We cannot claim to love God while abusing his creation.



We cannot know what God wants us to do with His creation; therefore it is presumptuous for humans to think they are acting to protect His creation. Rather we should leave the fate of the Earth in God's hands.



- After reviewing these arguments, believers were asked whether humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment.



Source: Steven Kull et al., "Faith and Global Policy Challenges," CISSM/PIPA Poll, December 2011.

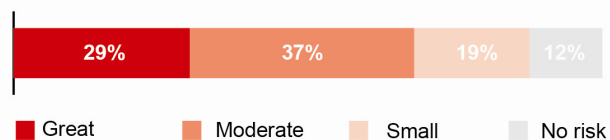
a spiritual obligation to prevent climate change; and 41 percent said that the United States has an obligation to protect the environment from pollution and degradation. Very few of these believers (10 percent and 19 percent, respectively) said that they believed the United States was living up to these obligations.

To better understand what role believers thought government (be it on the federal, state, or local level) should play in mitigating climate change, the survey asked respondents whether caring for "God's creation" necessitated supporting stricter environmental laws and regulations, and 65 percent of believers said that it did. More specifically, 80 percent of believers supported the notion that binding international agreements would be a good way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; 85 percent said that such agreements would be a good way to reduce pollution more generally; and 70 percent supported such agreements to prevent species loss. This robust support for government action contrasted with the 32 percent of believers who said that preventing climate change is an important goal and part of an individual's obligation to protect God's creation. And it also contrasted with the 36 percent of believers who identified reducing their own "carbon footprint" as an important goal and part of their obligation to protect God's

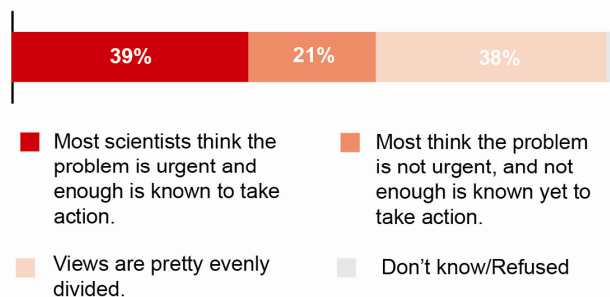
Figure 3

The nature of the climate change problem

- Believers were initially asked if they thought the risk that climate change could harm God's creation is:



- Believers were also asked if it was their impression that among the scientists of the world:



Source: Steven Kull et al., "Faith and Global Policy Challenges," CISSM/PIPA Poll, December 2011.

creation. An additional 43 percent of all believers said that reducing their carbon footprint was an important goal, but not in terms of their obligation to protect God's creation.

The nature of the climate change problem. Believers' responses to a range of general questions about climate change and the risks that it poses to humans and the environment were somewhat contradictory and raised important questions (see Figure 3). Nearly 66 percent of believers said that they thought climate change posed either a great or moderate risk of harming God's creation. However, when asked about their perceptions of scientists' views of climate change, only 39 percent of believers said that they believed scientists think the problem of climate change is urgent and that enough is known to take action; thirty-eight percent said that views among scientists were evenly divided on this subject. The difference between the 66 percent of believers who see climate change as posing risks to God's creation and the 39 percent who perceived a scientific consensus on the risk of climate change is significant. If scientific findings aren't motivating more than a third of those who believe climate change risks harming God's creation, what is? And why does a majority of believers doubt the very real, near-unanimity among scientists that climate change is an urgent problem? The second question has a more readily available and plausible explanation; however, answering the first might hold a key to better engaging believers on the basis of their religious and moral beliefs.

Variations among Catholics and Evangelical Christians. The survey sample included respondents with a representative cross-section of religious affiliations. The researchers were particularly interested in the opinions of Catholic and Evangelical Christians, because of the common belief, a belief that has been substantiated by previous public opinion studies, that Evangelicals generally hold more conservative political views on a range of public policy issues

and are more likely than other religious denominations to be dismissive of climate change and environmental risks and that Catholics have considerable political influence.⁵

In general, there was surprisingly little variation among the responses of Catholics and Evangelical Christians to the survey questions and little variation among these groups and other religious denominations. Among the notable differences that the survey identified were the following: Whereas 73 percent of all believers embraced the idea that humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment, 81 percent of Evangelical Christians embraced this idea; whereas 85 percent of believers said it was a good idea to use binding international agreements to reduce pollution of the environment, 90 percent of Catholics said it was a good idea; whereas 79 percent of all believers said it was a good idea to use binding international agreements to specifically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, only 72 percent of Evangelicals said it was a good idea; and whereas 79 percent of all believers said that it was a good idea to use binding international agreements to prevent the loss of species, 87 percent of Catholics thought this was a good idea.

As has been documented by previous public opinion research, Evangelical Christians stood out in their questioning of the scientific consensus on climate change and of the risks posed by climate change in their responses to this survey's questions. While 39 percent of all believers said that they thought scientists believed that the problem of climate change is urgent and that enough is known to take action, only 31 percent of Evangelical Christians surveyed agreed with this statement. While 66 percent of all believers said that there was a great or moderate risk that climate change could harm God's creation, only 56 percent (still a majority) of Evangelical Christians agreed.

The extent of spiritual obligations' influence

A central hypothesis of the public opinion study whose relevant results are outlined above was that the religious and moral beliefs of individuals would lead a majority to directly or indirectly prefer policies that would mitigate threats to the environment, particular the effects of global climate change. In aggregate, the responses to the survey validated this hypothesis. When believers thought about environmental degradation, and climate change in particular, in terms of their spiritual and moral obligations, a majority embraced policy preferences that would have the direct effect of limiting environmental damage. Believers' opinions varied on whether individuals and governments were obligated by religious and moral beliefs to act in the same manner or to the same degree, a point to which we will return to later in this analysis, but in general, thinking about climate change and threats to the environment in a religious or moral frame had the hypothesized effect.

⁵ The study identified Evangelical Christians by asking all respondents who affiliated themselves with any Christian denomination (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Catholic, Mormon, Pentecostal, Eastern Orthodox, or other Christian) whether they identified as "born again" or Evangelical Christian. Twenty-nine percent said that they did.

The results of the study also confirmed how few believers think of climate change and other threats to the environment in religious or moral terms. Once the survey questionnaire led respondents through arguments that familiarized them with the ways that their spiritual and moral beliefs could affect their choices about environmental policies, a much larger segment of believers began thinking in those terms. The following discussion will attempt to explore further these two central findings.

Understanding the effect of framing. A 2010 poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that only 6 percent of those that favored tougher environmental laws and regulations said that their religious beliefs were the greatest factor in their thinking. The poll didn't explore how religious beliefs influenced the remaining part of the 81 percent of the sample population that supported tougher environmental laws and regulations, but education and media influence were the factors that these respondents said had the greatest influence on their support for tougher environmental standards. It is fair to assume that religious beliefs played a role in the thinking of some of the remaining 94 percent of this segment of the survey population, just not a dominant one. In this sense, the Pew findings are more or less consistent with the findings of the CISSM/PIPA poll that few believers readily identify protecting the environment and reducing the effects of climate change as religious/spiritual obligations.

Rather than accept at face value this relatively low level of engagement on religious terms, the CISSM/PIPA study attempted to understand which specific elements motivate believers who do engage on those terms and whether a greater percentage of the population of believers held religious and moral beliefs that affected their environmental policy preferences than is commonly believed.

The notion of environmental stewardship and caring for "God's creation" is relatively well established within religious communities, particularly Christian communities. As the public discussion about climate change has grown during the last 20 years, some religious communities have explicitly related these notions to the environmental risks associated with climate change. This understanding of religious principles' currency was supported by the finding that 43 percent of believers surveyed in the CISSM/PIPA poll said that they were familiar with the religious notion that humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment.

Immediately after this initial question about environmental stewardship, the CISSM/PIPA poll presented two statements that deliberately framed the issues of stewardship and caring for God's creation in religious terms, invoking God's will and questioning what it means to love God:

Here are some arguments that are made about the idea of being stewards of the environment. Please select whether you find each one convincing or unconvincing.

We have a spiritual obligation to be responsible stewards of God's creation in our actions, and to support those with spiritual calling to work to protect the environment. We cannot claim to love God while abusing his creation.

We cannot know what God wants us to do with His creation; therefore it is presumptuous for humans to think they are acting to protect His creation. Rather we should leave the fate of the Earth in God's hands.

These statements were meant to invoke distinct ways of thinking about environmental stewardship and test their salience, but the statements' greatest impact might have been shifting the tone and framing of the survey questionnaire to solidly religious terms. Questioning what "God wants" and how individuals are meant to "love God" are activities that most often occur in the context of religious services, study groups, prayer sessions, or in other explicitly religious settings. Asking respondents to contemplate these concepts as part of the CISSM/PIPA survey undoubtedly led a fair number of believers to rethink their conception of environmental stewardship. Immediately after reviewing the statements presented above, respondents were again asked whether humans have a spiritual obligation to act as good stewards of the environment, and 73 percent embraced this concept (23 percent strongly and 50 percent somewhat), a significantly larger number than had previously said they were "familiar with the concept" (see Figure 2). It's unclear whether this shift is entirely due to the changed framing or whether other factors, such as the second question's slightly different wording or the sequence of questions, had an effect, but it does raise the strong possibility that framing an issue in terms of its relation to specific religious or moral beliefs could have a significant effect.

A similar framing effect could have been at play later in the survey when respondents were asked what should be done to protect the environment. When believers were asked whether the need to "care for God's creation" obligates them to support stricter environmental laws and regulations, 65 percent said that it does (16 percent "completely agree" that it does; 49 percent "mostly agree"). Similarly, when asked to describe the risk that climate change could harm God's creation, 29 percent said that it posed a "great" risk, while 37 percent said that it posed a "moderate" risk.

When a similar question was asked in much broader terms and without such a strong religious and moral framing, the response was different. The survey asked believers how they saw "the goal of preventing climate change," and only 32 percent said they saw it as a part of "an obligation to protect God's creation." When asked how they saw the goal of preventing environmental degradation, only 40 percent of believers said that they saw it as part of "an obligation to protect God's creation," still a far cry from the 66 percent of believers who agreed that climate change poses a risk to God's creation. The tack taken by these last two questions—framing the problems of climate change and environmental degradation in general terms and then asking respondents if their religious beliefs applied—likely explains the difference in the responses.

Examining the disconnect between spiritual values and climate change. While the framing effects of the survey's questions could explain the gap between individuals' assessments of their spiritual obligations and their willingness to act or their support for government action to mitigate the effects of climate change other factors could be at play. The most obvious

explanation, that believers do not see global climate change or other threats to the environment as problems requiring action, is not supported by the survey's findings. Most respondents did not reject the reality and importance of climate change and other threats to the environment.

Another possible hypothesis is that the international cooperation that is required to address these environmental threats requires interacting and entering into agreements with other nations, some of whom are dominated by non-Christians and may be perceived as inherently anti-Christian. Some Americans may find such dealings inherently noxious or question whether the other side will negotiate in good faith and honor its commitments. Yet, in this CISSM/PIPA survey and others before it, respondents have routinely said that the perception of evil in the world was a stronger reason for negotiating binding rules and effective verification to address potential threats than it was a reason for foregoing such negotiations.

A broader possibility, one that the survey didn't explicitly explore, is that spirituality and public policy engage different cognitive modes. Individuals think of moral responsibility and scientific analysis as different types of reasons for action or inaction. If, as the results of the CISSM/PIPA poll demonstrate, individuals are willing to act out of a moral construct without the necessary scientific validation, this suggests that using scientific arguments to try to convince more religiously motivated individuals of the need for action may be unnecessary. Indeed, invoking scientific arguments for a given policy position may actually be counterproductive if the association with science triggers a negative reaction.

In general, the difference in the number of believers who initially identified preventing climate change as a spiritual obligation and those who identified, say, reducing poverty and hunger in the world, speaks to the possibility that Americans think about their religious and moral beliefs more as they apply to individual lives (their own and the lives of others) than to big-picture, long-term issues such as climate change. It is relatively easy for Americans to feel a direct personal connection to problems of global poverty, through their own life experiences or through identifying with other human beings whose current suffering they could personally help to alleviate. It is much harder for them to feel a personal responsibility to learn about and take action on global policy problems that involve uncertain future risks rather than concrete immediate suffering; that are typically discussed by experts with complex technical knowledge; and that seem too big for individual actions to affect. Since these characteristics are shared by a number of other global policy problems, including infectious diseases and resource shortages, whatever is learned about helping individuals become more aware of the moral dimensions of their actions and government policy on climate change could be extended to these other global policy issues.

Individual vs. government action. The CISSM/PIPA survey findings shed some additional light on this last possibility. Though a large majority of believers (79 percent) said that they identified reducing their own carbon footprint as an important goal, only 36 percent saw this goal as part of

an obligation to protect God's creation. The survey didn't directly address the degree to which believers' overwhelming support for international agreements to address environmental threats, including climate change, were based on their sense of governments' spiritual obligations. (It's also unclear for how many believers religious and moral beliefs move them to support specific policy goals where other factors—economic, social, or scientific—have failed to do so.) Sixty-five percent of believers did, however, agree that they have an obligation to care for God's creation by supporting stricter environmental laws and regulations, suggesting that individuals might be more comfortable invoking their religious and moral beliefs in support of actions that can only be accomplished by a government.

That more believers might feel a spiritual obligation to support governmental action than perceive a spiritual obligation to take individual action doesn't mean that individuals are removing themselves from the equation. It could be that a majority of believers are generally more comfortable with supporting government action because it doesn't impact them as much as taking individual action might. Or it could be that though a majority of believers support government action out of perceived individual spiritual obligations, they don't necessarily believe that government is spiritually obligated to act. Indeed, the survey found that only a minority of believers felt that governments were spiritually obligated to address environmental threats, including climate change, suggesting that neither governmental nor individual action really engaged religious or moral beliefs—in contrast to the previously cited support for stricter environmental laws and regulations.

Activating spiritual obligations to care for the environment

The main findings of this public opinion survey suggest that it is possible to increase public support for individual and government action to address threats to the environment and to mitigate the effects of climate change by invoking spiritual/religious and moral beliefs. They also suggest that there are particular challenges when trying to get individuals to think of these issues in spiritual and moral terms.

One possible way to sidestep these roadblocks is by approaching threats to the environment and climate change through their relationships to other global policy issues, issues that already connect to a majority of religious believers' perceived spiritual obligations. Indeed, a range of religious environmental organizations, including the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, the National Association of Evangelicals, and others have all recently run public awareness campaigns or released publications directed at helping their constituents understand the connections between climate change and poverty, hunger, and/or public health (e.g. one Catholic Coalition on Climate Change campaign bluntly asks, "Who's under your carbon footprint?"). This approach has the added benefit of personalizing the impact

of environmental degradation and climate change in a way that talking about atmospheric forcings never will.

It might even be effective for secular environmental organizations to explore the ways in which their members' spiritual and moral beliefs intersect and overlap with their otherwise separate predilection to act in an environmentally conscious manner and to prefer government policies with similar ends in mind. Merely talking about climate change in a moral or religious frame (by referring to an obligation to be a steward of God's creation, for instance) is probably insufficient to engage individuals who otherwise view policy questions in moral terms to view environmental policy and climate change policy in similar terms—to change their personal behavior, to induce them to sacrifice financially and accept societal-level change, or to change their voting habits. Yet, the basic principles and precepts at the core of many religious communities in America, once invoked in support of a particular social or political effort, can galvanize large groups of people. And one need not look too far back in U.S. history to see examples of ways in which religious communities have then influenced U.S. policy or at the very least prompt sincere, widespread public reflection (see, for example, the civil rights movement and the anti-nuclear weapons movement).