

Common Problems, Uncommon Grounds:

Bridging the Faith Divide on Ecological Issues

Michael G. Bazemore, Jr. M.A.

William Peace University

When Pope Francis extended a hand to the religiously unaffiliated soon after his election to the papal throne, suggesting that Catholics and non-believers could be “our precious allies in the effort to defend human dignity, in building a peaceful co-existence between peoples, and in carefully protecting creation,” it was music to the ears of many in the non-theistic community. Later still, when he suggested to atheists, "Just do good, and we'll find a meeting point," voices could be heard among non-theists thanking the pontiff for his recognition of their potential for good (to be fair, there was also a good bit of snark in the response, as well). This goodwill was somewhat undercut as the Vatican began rolling back the more radical implications of this message.¹ Still, a hand of cooperation was offered, one which I have suggested atheists would be foolish to ignore, inasmuch as we are able to agree on what constitutes human dignity, cooperation and environmental stewardship.²

Francis' call is redolent of the challenge issued by E.O. Wilson in his 2006 book *The Creation*, a challenge that has been addressed in these pages by Bruce Little.³ In it Wilson frames an argument for environmental stewardship as a letter to a Protestant minister. Wilson seeks to

¹ For example, see Fr. Thomas Rosica, "Explanatory Note on the Meaning of 'Salvation' in Francis' Daily Homily of May 22." Retrieved August 31, 2013. Available at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/explanatory-note-on-the-meaning-of-salvation-in-francis-daily-homily-of-may-22>.

² Michael G. Bazemore, Jr. "Using a pope's words to make allies of atheists and the Catholic church." Op-ed, *Raleigh News & Observer*. March 25, 2013. Retrieved July 31, 2013. Available at http://www.newsobserver.com/2013/03/25/2779153_using-a-popes-words-to-make-allies.html.

³ Bruce R. Little, "Creation and Creative Stewardship Responsibility," *Theoecology* 1 (2012) accessed on 8/3/2013 at <http://theoecologyjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Journal%20Little%20R%205.pdf>

correct what he sees as human hubris towards nature, arguing that in failing to care for the biosphere around us, a biosphere not completely understood, we fail to care for ourselves.⁴ Wilson further attempts to correct our view of ourselves within nature, to help us shed illusions that nature exists not for its own sake, but for ours. The most sobering such moment comes when Wilson points out that were humans to go extinct tomorrow, only three other species, all human parasites, would go with us.⁵ However, by not caring for nature, Wilson suggests that we are the leading edge of a sixth mass extinction, an extinction fueled by a religious or scientific hubris that places us outside of the rest of life.⁶ In the end, Wilson's is a *cri de coeur* for environmental stewardship, that we all need to take a part in whether driven by scientific wonder or religious awe.⁷

Indeed, any cooperation on issues facing us all should be welcomed. In the United States, the reality that the arena in which these struggles will play out is political means also making common cause with Protestant and other religious groups. Even assuming an idyllic union of self-identified Catholics and the religiously unaffiliated in America, this accounts for only about 40 percent of the population; Protestants (mainline, evangelical, members of historically black churches), meanwhile, account for slightly more than 50 percent.⁸ This division, writ large, is also reflected in politics, with Catholics and the unaffiliated tending to skew Democratic and Protestants—with the notable exception of historically black churches—tending to skew

⁴ E.O. Wilson, *The Creation: an Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 11.

⁵ E.O. Wilson, *The Creation*, 33.

⁶ E.O. Wilson, *The Creation*, 81-83.

⁷ E.O. Wilson, *The Creation*, 165-168.

⁸ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Study—Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum, 2008), 5.

Republican.⁹ This division is, again according to polling data, reflected in positions of members of these communities on issues of human dignity, international cooperation and the environment. This paper will explore the last of these divides by focusing on a single environmental issue, anthropogenic global warming (AGW), by trying to tease out some of the underlying tensions, and by offering some thoughts on how the divide might be bridged.

Global warming is a topic on which we can at least suggest there is a consensus. Polling conducted in 2011 suggests that sixty-three percent of the American public accepts the premise that there is solid scientific evidence suggesting the Earth is warming, with thirty-eight percent accepting AGW, eighteen percent claiming it is natural and six percent uncertain. These numbers mark a drop from 2006, when seventy-seven percent of respondents accepted the reality of warming, forty-seven percent attributing AGW. In the 2011 poll, self-identified Democrats were more likely, at seventy-seven percent, to accept the evidence than independents and Republicans at sixty-three and forty-three, respectively.¹⁰ These numbers should be compared with the large majorities of scientists and, especially, to the 97 percent of climate scientists who are reported to accept anthropogenic climate change as a reality.¹¹

Partisan divide on the issue can be correlated, to some extent, with the political identification of religious groups. Evangelical Protestants and Mormons were most likely to self-identify as

⁹ *Idem.* *U.S. Religious Landscape Study—Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Politically Relevant*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum, 2008), 85.

¹⁰ Pew Center for the People & the Press, "Modest Rise in Number Saying There Is 'Solid Evidence' of Global Warming," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Center for the People & the Press, 2011). Retrieved July 31, 2013. Available at <http://www.people-press.org/2011/12/01/modest-rise-in-number-saying-there-is-solid-evidence-of-global-warming/?src=prc-number> A more comprehensive write-up of these numbers than space allows can be found on my blog at <http://intothedeepwater.blogspot.com/2013/06/common-problems-uncommon-grounds.html>

¹¹ John Cook, et al., "Quantifying the consensus on anthropogenic global warming in the scientific literature," *Environmental Research Letters* 8 (2013), 1-7.

Republicans, mainline Protestants were essentially split, while historically Black churches, Catholics, Jews and the unaffiliated leaned Democratic, observations essentially borne out in 2012 voting.¹² Despite the political leanings of various religious groups, though, there does appear to be a wide area of agreement on issues relating to the environment and global warming. For instance, across all religious groups, majorities agree that environmental regulation is worth the cost in money and jobs.¹³ Majorities in each group also accept the fact of global warming as a phenomenon, though differences remain with respect to whether it is a man-made one. Only among the unaffiliated do a majority, fifty-eight percent, accept the reality of AGW.¹⁴

Still, we see a clear consensus around two ideas. First, that environmental regulations are worthwhile and, second, that the earth is getting warmer, whatever the cause. This should, it would seem, form a basis for common action to combat global warming. Indeed, such an alliance would be formidable. But, as Michael Shellenberger and Ted Norhaus noted in their powerful 2004 indictment of the environmental movement, "The Death of Environmentalism," legislation is at a virtual standstill.¹⁵ The situation has not improved since.

¹² See note 4, above and Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Center for the People and the Press, 2012). Retrieved July 31, 2013. Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/11/07/how-the-faithful-voted-2012-preliminary-exit-poll-analysis/>

¹³ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Study—Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Politically Relevant*, 104.

¹⁴ Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, "Religious Groups' Views on Global Warming," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Center, 2009). Retrieved July 31, 2013. Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/16/religious-groups-views-on-global-warming/>

¹⁵ Michael Shellenberger and Ted Norhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism* (Chicago: The Heartland Institute, 2004), 9-10. I would like to thank my friend and colleague, environmental historian Dr. (congrats, old friend!) Neil Oatsvall, for pointing me towards some primers on environmental ethics, a subject still new to me, but not as new as it was.

Part of the problem may be political. Though majorities in all faith groups accept the reality of global warming, groups such as white Protestants who tend to vote Republican are least likely to accept that the cause of—and from this one can infer the solution to—global warming is man-made, and with the exception of the 109th and 110th Congresses (2007-2011) at least one house has been in Republican hands. There are also some potential structural impediments that need to be explored. For instance, does end-times theology disincline certain believers away from seeing warming as an issue? Does the very idea of global warming, and its apparent injustice, threaten notions of a just world? Is it a matter of group dynamics, one in which religious leaders have failed to rally the faithful to the cause? And what of the non-believers? Assuming most accept the reality, not simply of global warming, but of AGW, what might they do to facilitate cooperation across the gap?

This is not to claim that religious groups have taken no part in pursuing solutions to global warming and ecological problems. Many such groups, especially Christian groups, have felt moved to be part of the solution since the recognition of environmental crisis. Their involvement, as we shall see, comes from a number of sources, both Biblical and social. Perhaps the most important spur (and potential impediment) to their involvement, though, has been a tendency to lay ecological crisis at the doorstep of Christians. Lynn White, in his 1967 article in *Science*, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," was seminal in making this connection. In a brief survey of historical attitudes towards nature in the West, White notes a shift, concurrent with the adoption of new farming techniques in the eighth century, from an understanding of man as part of nature to man as its exploiter. He contends that this shift was related to the West's embrace of Christianity, in White's formulation, "especially in its Western

form...the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen."¹⁶ When man ceased to see nature as a theophany and began to see it as a machine to be understood, a process White sees gaining steam in the twelfth century and accelerating in the periods of the so-called Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, the sort of destructive exploitation that had led to the present crisis became possible. "More science and more technology," he cautions, "are not going to get us out of the present crisis until we find a new religion or re-think our old one." Only then might the "burden of guilt" Christianity carries be recognized and alleviated.¹⁷ White's words were especially powerful because he was not an outsider, but a devout Christian who wanted better from his coreligionists.

Christian intellectual responses to the environmental crisis since have largely been characterized by the way they react to White.¹⁸ Even when refuting his central thesis, Christian eco-theologians appear to tacitly accept White's "assumption about the cosmological roots of environmental problems and the need to promote cultural change."¹⁹ One early response to White came from the Presbyterian theologian Francis Schaeffer. In his *Pollution and the Death of Man*, he characterized White's article as "brilliant," suggesting that mankind had lost a sense of joy in nature.²⁰ Schaeffer proceeded to run through some possible approaches—pantheism, "Byzantine" Christianity, "Renaissance" Christianity—rejecting each as insufficient to inculcate the proper attitude towards nature that would allow mankind to face its environmental crisis.²¹

¹⁶ Lynn White, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1205.

¹⁷ White, "Historical Roots," 1206.

¹⁸ Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 (2009), 285.

¹⁹ Jenkins, "After Lynn White," 286.

²⁰ Francis Schaeffer and Udo Middleman, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1970; reprint 1992), 10-11.

²¹ Schaeffer and Middleman, *Pollution*, chapters 2 and 3.

In the end, Schaeffer settles on "Reformation" Christianity, which he argues speaks of man as united with nature in that both are creations of God.²² Furthermore, it encourages a proper attitude in that it tells us that God has given man *dominion* over nature, while retaining *sovereignty* for himself.²³ Only the view of Protestant Christianity can provide the needed corrective to the view of science White implicitly criticizes, which casts "man as less than man and nature as less than nature," and provides the basis White sees as necessary to view the environmental crisis properly.²⁴

Schaeffer seems to have grasped implicitly a truth made explicit in subsequent examinations of White. Indeed, as Willie Jenkins has suggested, White's contention should be seen as a boon to religious leaders worried about lack of influence in society, since the uniquely religious roots of the crisis lend themselves to a religious solution.²⁵ This has led many Protestant theologians to seek Biblical support for "Creation care."²⁶ In his survey of Protestant environmental thought, Robert Booth Fowler notes the strides made among mainline and liberal Protestants in promoting stewardship over dominion. Advocates preach that God's care in creating nature and the material demonstrates that all life is special to God, and use the idea of the Second Coming to show God's care for a creation that will be redeemed but which he has, in the interim, trusted to Man.²⁷ Such responses illuminate White's assertion that "what people do

²² Schaeffer and Middleman, *Pollution*, 47.

²³ Schaeffer and Middleman, *Pollution*, 68.

²⁴ Schaeffer and Middleman, *Pollution*, 84.

²⁵ Jenkins, "After Lynn White," 287.

²⁶ Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1995), 21. The crisis does not appear to be as acute for Catholic and Jewish thinkers, as will become apparent soon.

²⁷ Fowler, *Greening*, 76-77. Roger Gottlieb offers a cogent recap of many of the questions facing Christian theologians in chapter one of *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them."²⁸

Roger Gottlieb, in his 2006 *A Greener Faith* points to the strengths that religious communities can bring to the struggle. In addition to being a secular crisis arising from politics, economics and technology, Gottlieb adduces a spiritual dimension as well.²⁹ He suggests that religious mechanisms for acknowledging wrongdoing (sin) and enjoining repentance could be useful, and that religion offers believers the fortitude to face their failings because of their "comprehensive, large-scale understandings of what human beings are and what should be of ultimate value to us."³⁰ For the faithful, these understandings can be usefully applied in overcoming inertia to act. This is a real problem, and seems rooted in human psychology. In a study of attitudes towards climate change and how they might influence action, Anthony Leiserowitz has found that "Americans perceive climate change as a moderate risk that will predominantly impact geographically and temporally distant people or places," and that because of this they "tend to regard environment and climate change as relatively low national priorities."³¹ He concluded that because of this naysayers, who argue that global warming is either natural, overblown, unproven, not occurring or the result of a conspiracy find purchase among people for whom climate change offers no affect.³² Leiserowitz concludes by offering a

²⁸ White, "Historical Roots," 1205.

²⁹ Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 11.

³⁰ Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 12-13.

³¹ Anthony Leiserowitz, "Communicating the Risks of Global Warming: American Risk Perceptions, Affective Images and Interpretive Communities," in Susanne Moser and Lisa Dilling, eds., *Creating a Climate for Change: Facilitating Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44-45.

³² Leiserowitz, "Communicating the Risks," 51-53.

number of communication strategies for bringing the risk home concluding with the suggestion that messages need to be tailored for various interpretive communities.³³

Evangelical leaders seem to grasp this and some have begun the process. In 2004, the National Association of Evangelicals, in its statement *For the Health of the Nation: an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*, called for its members to become involved in advocating for just governance, the terms of which are spelled out.³⁴ Their call, which is peppered with references to "care for creation," gives special attention to man's responsibility vis-à-vis the natural world. "We affirm," the NAE stated, "that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part."³⁵ The document goes on to suggest that government has a positive role in protecting the environment and in alleviating human suffering as a result of bad environmental practices; it also enjoins Christians to take independent action "to shape their personal lives in creation-friendly ways."³⁶ The NAE has implicitly recognized a point made explicit by Gottlieb, that in order to change laws and institutions, people are going to have to change as well.³⁷ Statements like the NAE's can help overcome internal resistance to action within Christian communities, since they emphasize a method of reaching decisions—namely, prayer—that Christians find authoritative.³⁸ The influence of prayer leaders can help smooth acceptance of an otherwise potentially problematic position.

³³ Leiserowitz, "Communicating the Risks," 57-61.

³⁴ National Association of Evangelicals, *For the Health of the Nation: an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Evangelicals, 2004), 2.

³⁵ National Association of Evangelicals, *For the Health of the Nation*, 11.

³⁶ National Association of Evangelicals, *For the Health of the Nation*, 12.

³⁷ Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 102.

³⁸ Paul A. Djupe and Gregory W. Gwisada, "Evangelizing the Environment: Decision Process Effects in Political Persuasion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49 (2010), 75.

This is an important consideration, especially considering other obstacles to encouraging environmental action that may arise specifically from a Christian worldview. Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer have suggested that one reason for refusal of Christians in the United States to accept evidence of AGW comes from a need to believe in a just world.³⁹ Their research indicates that "dire messages warning of the severity of global warming and its dangers can backfire, paradoxically increasing skepticism about global warming by contradicting individuals' deeply held beliefs that the world is fundamentally just," and suggesting that messages of risk be coupled with a solution in order to reduce the perceived threat.⁴⁰ David Barker and David Bearce, in their examination of American attitudes towards climate change, have noted a problem stemming from the embrace of end-times theology. They cite the research of Darren Sherkat and Christopher Ellison, who argued that Christians, though they are as likely as other Americans to perceive an environmental crisis, are less likely to support large-scale action to fix it. This was seen to be especially true among Christians who believe in Biblical inerrancy.⁴¹ Their proposal, borne out by experimental data, was that the shortened sociotropic horizon called for by belief in a coming end meant that large-scale action to combat climate change, in addition to being expensive, would be "ultimately futile, and hence ill-advised."⁴²

This makes the role of prayer leaders all the more important in helping Christians embrace the evidence for AGW. Along the way, they will need to accept the science that produced that evidence and which offers the best hope for formulating solutions. This is the last potential

³⁹ Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, "Apocalypse Soon? Dire Messages Reduce Belief in Global Warming by Contradicting Just-World Beliefs," *Psychological Science* 22 (2011), 34.

⁴⁰ Feinberg and Willer, "Apocalypse Soon," 36-37.

⁴¹ David C. Barker and David H. Bearce, "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change," *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (2012), 268.

⁴² Barker and Bearce, "End-Times Theology," 269

obstacle for some believers to overcome that I would like to discuss, because it will allow non-believers to join the conversation. As has been noted in these pages by Alexander Glass, the true scope of the current warming trend can only be glimpsed by peering into a deep past that extends beyond the timescales allowable by a young-Earth creationism.⁴³ Though Glass suggests that believers in a young Earth can embrace responsible stewardship based on present conditions, he points to a larger problem.⁴⁴ Simply put, many religious believers do not accept the science that leads to the conclusion that AGW is a fact, especially as that touches on the age of the earth and the theory of evolution by natural selection advanced by Charles Darwin. Though there are Christian scientists who have come to accept the revelations of science, this will remain a stumbling block for some.⁴⁵ There is also a perception among many of the faithful that scientists hold that only material explanations of phenomena matter, leading to a mistaken perception that science is atheistic.⁴⁶

Such a perception becomes more problematic because, it seems, the religious simply do not trust atheists; they are, not to put too fine a point on it, prejudiced. Observing that as recently as 2007, only forty-five percent of Americans indicated they would vote for an atheist president, psychologists working at the University of British Columbia and the University of

⁴³ Alexander Glass, "Human Impact on Earth's Temperature and Christian Dilemma," *Theoecology* 1 (2012), 1-18.

⁴⁴ Glass, "Human Impact," 3.

⁴⁵ For theistic attempts to reconcile current science with belief in God see, for example, Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your World* (New York: Viking, 2007); John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: a Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008); and Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: a Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (New York: Cliff Street, 1999). Each of these represents Christian scientists explaining how their belief has been enriched and confirmed by the encounter with modern science. Non-orthodox Jews appear to have by and large come to an accommodation with Darwin. See, for instance, the essays in the recent *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, Geoffrey Cantor and Marc Swetlitz, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 72.

Oregon designed a series of experiments to measure anti-atheist prejudice and determine its source.⁴⁷ They began from the understanding that in cases where one group fosters a prejudice against another group, that prejudice is conditioned on the specific threat the out-group presents. For instance, reactions among Christian groups to homosexuals, two of the same authors contend in another study, is based on disgust, possibly related to hygienic concerns.⁴⁸ Religious belief, they propose, arose as a mechanism that promotes cooperation by "in effect outsourcing social monitoring and punishment to supernatural agents not bound to the costs of monitoring and punishment."⁴⁹ Over time, as communities grew, religiosity became an effective shorthand for trustworthiness, creating a situation where those eschewing religious belief were *ipso facto* perceived as untrustworthy.⁵⁰ Through experiment, they found that distrust was, indeed, a central player in anti-atheist prejudice, with the level of prejudice increasing according to how religious study participants claimed to be.⁵¹ In later work, they found that this distrust could be mitigated through subtle reminders of secular authority, suggesting that governments perform much of the same policing and punishment work previously attributed to gods and that "reminders of secular authority increase the perceived trustworthiness of atheists."⁵² No analogous work has been performed regarding atheist perceptions, but some suppositions are possible. Based on the above-mentioned influence of prayer leaders among Christians, one can assume that perceived leaders among atheists—and there are such people,

⁴⁷ Will M. Gervais, Azim F. Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan, "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust Is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101 (2011), 1190.

⁴⁸ Will M. Gervais and Ara Norenzayan, "Reminders of Secular Authority Reduce Believers' Distrust of Atheists," *Psychological Science* 23 (2012), 487. This seems analogous to the moral "modules" Jonathan Haidt proposes as the basis for Moral Foundations Theory in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

⁴⁹ Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, "Do You Believe," 1190.

⁵⁰ Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, "Do You Believe," 1191.

⁵¹ Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, "Do You Believe," 1200.

⁵² Gervais and Norenzayan, 489.

despite the amorphous nature of atheism—can help smooth acceptance of believers. They will have to overcome their discomfort with particularly Christian methods of arriving at answers, namely prayer. Further, by appeals to secular authority, civic duty and so forth, it is possible that trust can be extended.

Of course trust is bidirectional, and some prominent atheists have not exactly been helpful in this regard. The vanguard of the so-called "New Atheists," whose approach to bringing atheism to the masses is occasionally redolent of a peculiar evangelism, are scientists such as the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the neuroscientist Sam Harris. They are aided in this by figures such as the late journalist Christopher Hitchens and the philosopher Daniel Dennett. Their message is simple: moderate religion is a pox that ultimately enables fanaticism; religion is a "delusion;" religion is a product of natural selection, whose hold on man needs to be shaken off; religion "poisons everything."⁵³ In place of religion, each suggests an embrace of science and reason, suggesting a universality that, not coincidentally, has been noted by theistic proponents of scientific inquiry as well.⁵⁴ Such an approach, we are assured, will allow us to see mankind's problems in a proper light and will lead to an ethics, in some cases, a spirituality based in reason and shorn of the harmful effects of religion.⁵⁵ Small wonder, then, that believers might have a hard time working with non-believers in good faith. It would be easy to

⁵³ These, in short, are the views expressed in what might be considered the "canon" of New Atheism: Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007). The literary apotheosis of this type is probably the surgeon Henry Perowne in Hitchens' close friend Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2005), who rhapsodizes about Darwinian evolution and coolly dismisses notions of a creator.

⁵⁴ Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution*, 65. His concept of science as a form of public revelation to be read alongside the private revelation of religious scriptures could represent an important concept in bridging the gap.

⁵⁵ Harris, *The End of Faith*, explores this fully in chapters 6 and 7.

for them to think that their supposed partners were mocking them behind their backs, especially reading blanket attacks on faith that allow for no differentiation between moderate and radical religious actors.⁵⁶ That many of the leading figures are scientists likely contributes to the perception of science as atheistic.

If the embrace of science in the fight against AGW requires mental adjustments on the part of some believers, some non-believers may need to adjust their attitudes to religion and the religious so we can all meet in the middle. One path forward was suggested by the late paleontologist, and writer of popular works on evolution and natural history, Stephen Jay Gould. In a piece written for the journal *Natural History*, Gould recounts a conversation with European priests, concerned about the growing threat of "scientific" creationism in America. Gould told the priests, for whom evolution and the old age of the Earth was an established fact, that scientific creationism and the need to explicitly reconcile science and the Bible is a phenomenon arising only among those who believe in the absolute literal truth of Scripture.

Catholic traditions of exegesis, by contrast, have as their basis the thinking of Augustine, who argued in *On Christian Doctrine* that some passages in the Bible are to be read literally, while others point to things hidden.⁵⁷ Reason and scientific knowledge, in this tradition, are ways of knowing God, the author of both Scripture and Nature.⁵⁸ Similar, non-literal approaches to Biblical interpretation have long been part of the rabbinic tradition in Judaism as well, where it was assumed that behind the plain meaning of the words lay a practical meaning intended to

⁵⁶ Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, 284-286 and Harris in the *End of Faith*, 31-36.

⁵⁷ Marcia Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven, Conn.; Yale University Press, 1997), 35.

⁵⁸ Marcia Colish, *Medieval Foundations.*, 31.

guide, an approach that found application in the nineteenth century to the reception of Darwin.⁵⁹ In both older traditions there is no perceived conflict between truths revealed by science and those revealed by scripture. He concluded this was possible because in those traditions, and in mainline Protestant traditions, the areas in which science and religion were deemed competent simply did not intersect.⁶⁰ He named this idea Non-Overlapping Magisteria, borrowing the Catholic term *magisterium* to signify the realms in which science and religion are competent, which he labeled NOMA for short.⁶¹ Gould's defense of NOMA was that it restricted both science and religion. "If religion," he argued, "can no longer dictate the nature of factual conclusions residing within the magisterium of science, then scientists cannot claim higher insight into moral truth from any superior knowledge of the world's empirical constitution." Indeed, he argued rightly that science can neither prove nor disprove religious ideas like God or the soul.⁶²

What Gould advocated is a cease-fire of sorts, wherein both science and religion retire to their respective corners and tend to their areas of competence.

Gould's proposed compromise has been met with almost complete disdain from the leading lights of the New Atheists. Sam Harris rejected it as something possible only in circumstances where religion has been "politically hobbled," as it has in the West and in later works proposed

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Cantor, "Anglo-Jewish Responses to Evolution," in Cantor and Swetlitz, eds., *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, 31-32.

⁶⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, "Non-Overlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 1066 (1997) reprinted in his *Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms* (New York: Random House, 1998), 270-271.

⁶¹ Gould, "Non-Overlapping Magisteria," 274.

⁶² Gould, "Non-Overlapping Magisteria," 281-282.

a scientifically-informed basis for those areas Gould had ceded to religion.⁶³ Dennett, while not dismissing it out of hand notes issues "secularists" (to whom we will return momentarily) might have with ceding too much authority on morality and ethics to religion.⁶⁴ Dawkins is even less sanguine, suggesting that the embrace of NOMA by religious thinkers was itself a capitulation and tacit admission that they had no evidence for the "God Hypothesis."⁶⁵ Hitchens says little, only noting that even if we accept NOMA as a model, this does not mean the two sides can coexist peacefully.⁶⁶

Whatever its flaws, though, NOMA seems to be a solid neutral territory on which believers and non-believers can meet in the pursuit of common goals. When non-believers adhere to it, they should feel less compelled to tell the faithful that science requires them to be atheists.

Consequently it assures the faithful that God and science are not incompatible, returning to the outlook of the founders of modern science, men such as Galileo and Newton, who had no difficulty reconciling the revelations vouchsafed by the books of nature with those revealed in the books of Scripture. On issues of ethics, it allows both sides to derive moral force from whatever source they choose. Politically, it requires secularism, a word often used and rarely correctly. True secularism is an outlook on the part of government and society that does not discriminate between religious actors or between religious and non-religious actors. Secularism

⁶³ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 15-16; *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

⁶⁴ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 30.

⁶⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 54-61. In the original piece, Gould admits that proof of God or of the soul lies outside the magisterium of science, a concession one assumes Dawkins is unwilling to make.

⁶⁶ Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 282-283. While I was editing this paper, the New Yorker published a piece by the noted cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker that re-iterated concerns with NOMA. In "Science is not Your Enemy," *New Republic* accessed online August 6, 2013 at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114127/science-not-enemy-humanities#> Interestingly Pinker, like Dawkins, identifies NOMA as the emerging Stephen Jay Gould's *Rocks of Ages* (New York: Ballantine, 1999) rather than from the pages of *Natural History*.

in the United States was one of the signal achievements of the nineteenth century when politicians aligned with Thomas Jefferson began to argue that clerical leaders should not use their pulpits to advance political positions, with some arguing that only by this separation could the Christian faith remain pure.⁶⁷ Today, often due to struggles by the same religious groups that fostered it, secularism is often taken to mean atheism or, at the very least, strict separation of Church and State.⁶⁸ This misidentification is not peculiar to believers; non-believers, who want to claim the mantle of secularism, have been lax in their definitions as well. Jacques Berlinerblau, in what he has termed "a call to arms for religious freedom," suggests that secularists, including atheists, need reclaim secularism's true meaning and build coalitions with the faithful in order to advance common social goals.⁶⁹

One model may be the sort of interfaith—construed broadly—work encouraged by young atheists like Chris Stedman, Humanist chaplain at Harvard. Though targeted at non-believers skeptical of the possibility of such work, Stedman suggests engagement with believers for a number of reasons, both practical and philosophical.⁷⁰ Such encounters, and the stories they enable, will attune us to the things we share in common and on those things we can make progress together. And what more do we have in common than the planet we share? What greater story than that of our own survival? What goal could be more urgent? The size of the challenge before us makes the differences we might have as believers and non-believer seem, ultimately, parochial.

⁶⁷ Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 120-126.

⁶⁸ Jacques Berlinerblau, *How to Be Secular: a Call to Arms for Religious Freedom* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2012), 88.

⁶⁹ Berlinerblau, *How to Be Secular*, 195-198.

⁷⁰ Chris Stedman, *Fathiest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 165-176.

Environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change are challenges facing each individual inhabitant of planet Earth. Cooperation across any number of lines (national, economic, religious) will be required to face this challenge, since no individual or group of individuals possesses the capability or the capital of getting the job done. In this paper, I have attempted to address the notion of believers and non-believers coming together in service of one another. People of good will on both sides of the belief divide are agreed on the necessity and desirability of action. Prophets like Pope Francis and E.O. Wilson have pointed up the need to bridge this gap. To their stirring pleas, I believe I have outlined some of the potential challenges that believers and non-believers face when addressing one another, including communication issues stemming from radically different epistemologies and bedrock issues of trust. Using the admittedly imperfect NOMA concept advanced by the late Stephen Jay Gould, I have proposed grounds of neutrality on which the sides can meet in an attitude of mutual respect, or at least toleration. We need something like this, because as long as we stand on uncommon grounds we will never successfully address the common problems we face not as believers or as non-believers, but as human beings and as only temporary residents of this tiny blue-green orb speeding through the cosmic night.

* * *

I would like to extend my thanks to Prof. Robert Y. George, editor-in-Chief of *Theoecology Journal*, for his kind invitation to write this paper and for his helpful suggestions on the original draft, most specifically his suggestions that E.O. Wilson's *The Creation* could be useful in exploring broad interfaith dialog and that Francis A. Schaeffer's response to the arguments of

Lynn White, especially White's criticism of Christianity, in *Pollution and the Death of Man*, illuminates an important thread of Christian thought in response to environmental crisis. I would also like to extend general thanks to the editors of *Theoecology Journal*, a new vehicle for interdisciplinary scholarly dialogue.