

## **PAUL TILLICH: CLIMATE PROPHECY versus PROFIT**

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### **Abstract**

Paul Tillich's 1962 sermon, "Man and Earth," was prophetic. He said, "We have no guarantee against man-made floods...." Floods are now increasing. Global ice is melting. Sea levels are rising four times faster than in 1900 from global warming.

What are the preliminary and ultimate concerns of those who deny what 97% of climate scientists have concluded? That is, increasing carbon dioxide emissions, mostly from our profitable fossil fuel burning, are warming our planet via the Greenhouse effect.

Might climate-change denial be a kind of sin? Sin for Tillich was separation and estrangement, part of our finitude, our limited ability to completely comprehend such complex and ambiguous issues as global warming. Profit-making capitalist materialism was for Tillich a quasi-religious form of idolatry: elevating a preliminary or finite concern to ultimacy. In Tillich's climate-change prophesy, his ultimate concern for God's creation trumped profit. Tillich would have been supportive of Pope Francis' "Laudato Si; On Care for Our Common Home." We have the moral responsibility to stop plundering our planet for profit, the poor suffering the most.

### **American Academy of Religion Paper**

Paul Tillich's sermon "Man and Earth" delivered in 1962 at the Harvard Memorial Church was prophetic. He said, "It is possible that the earth may bear us no longer. We ourselves may prevent her from doing so. No heavenly sign, like the rainbow given to Noah as a promise there would not be a second flood, has been given us.

We have no guarantee against man-made floods....(1)" The biblical passage to which Tillich was referring is as follows (Genesis 9: 8 -10, 12-13):

<sup>8</sup>Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup>"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth... <sup>12</sup>And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you

and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup>I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

To put this in perspective, the world population in Noah's day was about 3 million people. In 1962, when Tillich delivered his sermon, we had 3 billion people, Our population has now exploded to 7 billion.

It would have been impossible for 3 million people in Noah's day to burn enough fossil fuels to break the covenant with God. We now have 7 billion people burning fossil fuels whose increasing carbon dioxide levels are warming our earth via the Greenhouse Effect.

Miami Beach and coastal cities now have flood zone during king high tides. Rising salt water levels are diluting our fresh water supplies. Sea levels are rising from melting snow and thermal expansion at the highest rate in thousands of years. Climate scientist James Hansen recent paper published with 13 coauthors predicts the oceans could rise to 3 to 15 feet as early as 2050. Floods and other weather extremes are occurring more frequently. Storm surges from hurricane Katrina resulted in 150 billion dollars of damage to New Orleans and those from Sandy in 50 billion dollars to New Jersey and New York City.

North Carolina experienced flood damage of billions of dollars damage in October 2016 from Hurricane Matthew. Ironically, five years ago, the Science Panel of the North Carolina Coastal Resources Commissioner presented a report that outlined the possibility that sea levels along the coast could rise significantly. Reaction from local land managers and developers was quick and overwhelmingly negative. The General Assembly passed a law forbidding communities from using the report to pass new rules.

"I think this is a brilliant solution," comedian Stephen Colbert said. "If your science gives you a result that you don't like, pass a law saying the result is illegal. Problem solved." President-elect Donald Trump believes global warming is a hoax.

What are the economic, preliminary, and ultimate concerns of those who are skeptical or deny what 97% of climate scientists have concluded? That is, increasing carbon dioxide emissions, mostly from our fossil fuel burning, are warming the planet via the Greenhouse effect (2) and causing our glaciers to melt.

Climatologists like Michael E. Mann and other scientists, who participated in the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (“IPCC”) that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, have had their integrity perniciously attacked. They have been subject to congressional and criminal investigations. Death threats have been made. Attacks on scientists are part of a destructive public-relations campaign being waged in an effort to discredit climate science.

These attacks are evidence that our “World is at War” as Bill McKibben put it recently. “It’s not that global warming is *like* a world war. It *is* a world war. And we are losing,” ....particularly with the recent election of Donald Trump.

These threats and attacks would have been for Tillich examples of our estrangement and the brokenness of our human existence and our separation from the Ground of Being- God. For astrophysicist Niel Degraassie Tyson, “The good thing about science is that it’s true, whether or not you believe in it.” (3). However, taking global action to combat climate change requires public support. The ideology of free market fundamentalism, aided by a too-compliant media, has skewed public understanding.

In the introduction to his book, “The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth (5),” biologist Prof. Edward O. Wilson wrote a letter to a Baptist preacher requesting help in saving our planet. Prof. Wilson realized that millions of Baptist skeptics and deniers outnumber secular-humanist biologists like him.

I believe the following statement is relevant to politicians from oil-producing states: *“It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”* [Upton Sinclair](#) 1934

A large number of climate change deniers are also religious conservatives. However, in 2002, the Environmental Evangelical Network launched a headline-grabbing “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign to call attention to fuel efficiency. In 2006, the group organized the Evangelical Climate Initiative, which released a statement making a moral argument for climate action. Dozens of evangelical leaders signed, including Rick Warren, whose megachurches have tens of thousands of members.

Meanwhile, the Regeneration Project’s “Interfaith Power and Light” campaign, which launched in 2000 as “a religious response to global warming,” is rapidly expanding its membership. The interfaith section of the 2014 People’s Climate March in New York City saw thousands of people from more than 30 faiths—Baptist, Zoroastrian and everything in between—rally for climate action. The World Council of Churches, representing hundreds of millions of Christians, has committed to divesting its multimillion-dollar endowment from fossil fuels.

At December 2015’s historic climate summit in Paris, there were morning worship groups, Vatican negotiators and an exhibit at Notre-Dame Cathedral called “Ode to God’s Creation.” “None of this was really on the horizon 20 years ago,” says Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University. “There has been an explosion.”

However, since the Fall of 2015 we started to lose ground. In 2015, 76% of Americans believed that climate change was occurring. Recent results of University of Texas at Austin pole concluded that this has dropped slightly to 73%. A recent Gallup pole asked, “Do you think that global warming will pose a serious threat to you and you and your way of life during your lifetime?” In 2015, 62% said “yes.” In 2016 this number dropped to 57%. Similarly, the number of those who said “no,” in 2015 was 37% and this increased to 41% in 2016. In summary, the number of people regarding global warming as a serious threat, has decreased from 62% in

2015 to 57% this year. This contributed to the election of Donald Trump who has threatened to roll back the environmental progress we have made to date.

Tillich's climate-change prophecy is being trumped by profit. This is justified by belief in the "invisible hand" of Scotland's Adam Smith that guided the pursuit for individual profit towards creating the *Wealth of Nations* (6). This 1776 economics should be updated. William Forster Lloyd (1833) observed the "Tragedy of the Commons," in which the pursuit of individual gain leads to negation of the common good.

According to modern Scottish theologian Michael Northcott, the pursuits of individual and corporate profits together with the culture-nature divide are the root causes of our global ecological crisis (7). Corporations have the same rights as individuals, according the *Citizens United* decision of the Supreme Court. For Northcott, "nations have legal and moral responsibilities to rule over limited terrains and to guard a just and fair distribution of the fruits of the earth within the ecological limits of our planet," with its exploding population of seven billion.

Ecology is dependent on the climate. Its science is complex, counterintuitive, and somewhat ambiguous. I became aware of this in my debates with climate change skeptics like: (a) Prof. of Physics at Hartford University, Laurence Gould, at the American Physical Society Meeting, U Mass Amherst, November 2011; and (b) Dr. Ted Kochanski, Chief Scientist, Sensors Signals Systems, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Climate Discussion, NewTV, August 2014. Many confuse short-term weather fluctuations with long-term climactic averages over decades to centuries. Climate change deniers "cherry pick" data to support their limited point of view. Main stream climate science is comprehensive, accounts for large data sets, and can make predictions.

From a scientific perspective, skepticism is a *virtue*, but denial of empirically verified findings, a *vice*. Progress has come from skeptics who overturned dominant paradigms. For example, skeptics like Copernicus and Galileo in the 17th century

proposed the heliocentric solar system, which eventually overturned Ptolemy's 2<sup>nd</sup> century geocentric one. For Tillich the dialectic boundary was the best place for acquiring knowledge (8).

Might climate change denial be a modern kind of sin? Sin includes rebellion against the creation, according to process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Sochocki (9). Pope Francis has described man's destruction of the environment a sin and that climate action is a sacred duty. For climate deniers who do not want to do anything about climate change, their sin would be one of omission rather than commission. For those who make death threats, their sin would be one of commission.

Sin for Paul Tillich was separation and estrangement from our life-supporting earth. Sin is evidence of our finitude, our limited ability to completely comprehend ambiguous, complex issues. For Tillich's colleague Reinhold Niebuhr, "No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness (10)."

Since "all have sinned and fallen short (Romans 3:23)," climate change activists should love deniers by listening and talking with them. Climate science should be framed without cultural beliefs that antagonize political and religious conservatives.

Tillich lamented the loss of nature as sacrament, leading to capitalist materialism as a quasi-religious form of idolatry (11). For him, idolatry was elevating a preliminary or economic concern to an ultimate concern. In his climate-change prophesy, his ultimate concern for God's creation trumped profit. Tillich's "Courage to Be" (12) is hopefully giving strength and support to climate scientists like Michael Mann. Their lives have been threatened for their scientific findings about global warming. For Tillich, the power of love was stronger than the power of death.

Tillich believed in the Protestant Principle as prophetic and critical judgment against idolatry. He also believed in Catholic Substance, tradition and liturgy as concrete embodiments of the Divine. Tillich would have been supportive of Pope Francis belief that we have the moral responsibility to bequeath a habitable planet to future generations (13, 14). Pope Francis enjoins us to stop plundering our planet for profit, the poor suffering the most. "Our sister, Mother Earth, now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."

Tillich 1962 prophesy about rising seas came true. Rachel Carlson published *Silent Spring* the same year. Let's encourage everyone including Donald Trump to watch the "National Geographic" climate change documentary "Before the Flood."

Tillich also had prophetic wisdom for those who are ambiguous about climate change. He said, "The problem of life is ambiguity. Every process has its contrast within itself (positive and negative) driving us to the quest for the unambiguous life, or life under the impact of spiritual presence. Spiritual presence, the power within us but not of us, conquers the negatives of religion, culture, and morality. The symbols anticipating the Eternal Life present answers to the problem of life."

At the conclusion of Tillich's sermon "Man and Earth" which you can read in his sermon book, "The Eternal Now," he said:

"The question of humans and our earth that has plunged our time into such anxiety and conflict of feeling and thought, cannot be answered without an awareness of the eternal presence. For only the eternal can deliver us from our sensation of being lost in the face of the time and space of the universe. Only the eternal can save us from the anxiety of being a meaningless bit of matter in a meaningless vortex of atoms and electrons. Only the eternal can give us the certainty that the earth, and, with it, mankind, has not existed in vain, even should history come to an end tomorrow. For the last end is where the first beginning is, in Him to Whom "a thousand years are but as yesterday."

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