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Greening the Media

The United States Is Not So Religious

How to understand--and counter--faith-based denials of global warming

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Time after time, we are told—confidently, triumphantly, almost hymnally—that the United States was founded on religious principles and is a wholly religious country.

Such beliefs are wrong on both counts. They're wrong about yesterday and wrong about today.

The facts not only undermine this mythology; they can also help us understand the links between religion, ideology, and the denial of climate change.

First, some history: at the time of its formation, the US was not very religious. Between 15 and 20% of the population attended church, and Puritanism was the object of mockery as much as adherence. The Constitution makes no reference to god, and Article 10 of the 1786-1816 Barbary Treaties (popularly known as the Treaty of Tripoli) specifies that the nation "is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."¹

Across the 19th century, however, a strong relationship developed between immigration, economic change, and religious uptake. In the absence of state aid, churches competed with one another to recruit adherents.

For free settlers and enslaved ones alike, faith provided reasons to flee, forms of succor, and means of collective identification. Attending church helped maintain ethnic solidarity in a new environment, leavened a lack of class bearings, gave solace through the horrors of slavery, and provided social services denied by the brutality of capital and its plutocratic state.

This tendency became more marked with the mass arrival of continental Europeans between 1890 and 1920, when factory life and industrial capitalism emerged. The self-oriented aspects of Protestant religion offered a possessive individualism that helped leaven the dictates of obedience at work.

As measured by leaps in the percentage of the population going to church, so-called Great Awakenings occurred in 1850 (34%), 1890 (45%), 1926 (56%), and 1980 (62%). Those dates correlate with economic and racial crises: the impact of the 1837-44 financial panic on slave states; the 1890 recession and 1885 Chinese Exclusion Act; the depression and immigration restrictions of the 1920s; and our own crisis-laden epoch of welfare reform, regressive taxation, and panic over Mexicans, Syrians, and anyone who's different.²

Yet today, a quickly growing minority does not belong to any organized faith: 23% of the adult population, up from 16% in 2007. Most non-believers are young people, and they have more progressive opinions about the environment, the state, and immigration than older Americans.

That does leave a significant majority of believers. And the impact of their faith works against knowledge in many ways. Consider evolution: 60% of white evangelical Protestants and 49% of black Protestants deny evolution, whereas 86% of agnostics and atheists recognise the science. When asked which issues matter most to them, just 34% of Americans list climate change as critical.³

And while 77% of Hispanic Catholics and 56% of black Protestants think global warming is both real and caused by humans, only 41% of white Protestants believe this. Within that group, just 28% of white evangelical Christians acknowledge the human role in climate change, and most of them are the people who deny the need for environmental regulation.⁴

Evangelical Christians have a very particular average profile: wealthy, educated, white, male, and Republican—and evangelical. Highly individualistic and opposed to state economic and social intervention, they favor growth over environmentalism.⁵

Climate change is a crucial scientific reality that must be given priority over faith, especially as parlayed by these privileged men.

Their faith-based proclamations are deceitful. First, the denial of environmentalism does not have strong theological foundations: intergenerational care of the non-human world is central to all major religions.⁶

Second, they hide behind Christianity to fend off critical scrutiny of their claims. As the dissenting evangelical Christian Katharine Hayhoe, a climate scientist, says: “It’s very politically incorrect in our culture today to attack somebody’s faith, especially the Christian faith.” But for her, the Christian camouflage of climate-change denial conceals a selfish anti-government ideology.⁷

Like Hayhoe, all concerned citizens, including evangelical Christians, should be alert to cynical faith-based denials of global warming peddled by self-interested elites.

Regardless of faith, there are areas where the science just matters more than anything else. Our history and our young people give us the lead: we don’t have to be so religious.

1. Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*. New York: Viking, 2006, p. 108; Emory Elliott, “Foreword.” *The Puritan Origins of American Sex*. Ed. Tracy Fessenden, Nicholas F. Radel, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska. New York: Routledge, 2001, p. ix; <http://www.thenation.com/article/our-godless-constitution/>; http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html; http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp.
2. Toby Miller, *Makeover Nation: The United States of Reinvention*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008.
3. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>; <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/report/2009/05/19/6042/glo...>; <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/01/americans-politics-and-science-iss...>
4. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-...>
54. <http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Global%20Issues/12-2015%20Segmentation%20Repo...>
6. <http://www.gci.org.uk/Documents/E80.pdf>; <http://fore.yale.edu/publications/bibliographies/>.
7. http://www.salon.com/2015/07/07/faith_based_arguments_that_deal_with_cli...



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