

Religion and the Roots of Climate Change Denial: A Catholic Perspective



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Syrian Refugees: Flight Into the Unknown

MARCH 2015

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

CLIMATE CHANGE DOES NOT EXIST

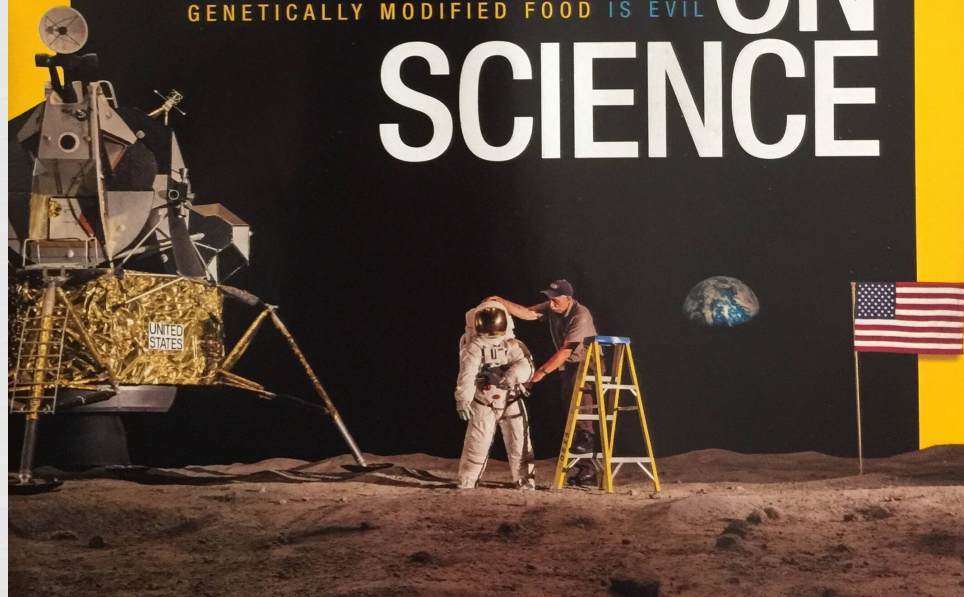
EVOLUTION NEVER HAPPENED

THE MOON LANDING WAS FAKE

VACCINATIONS CAN LEAD TO AUTISM

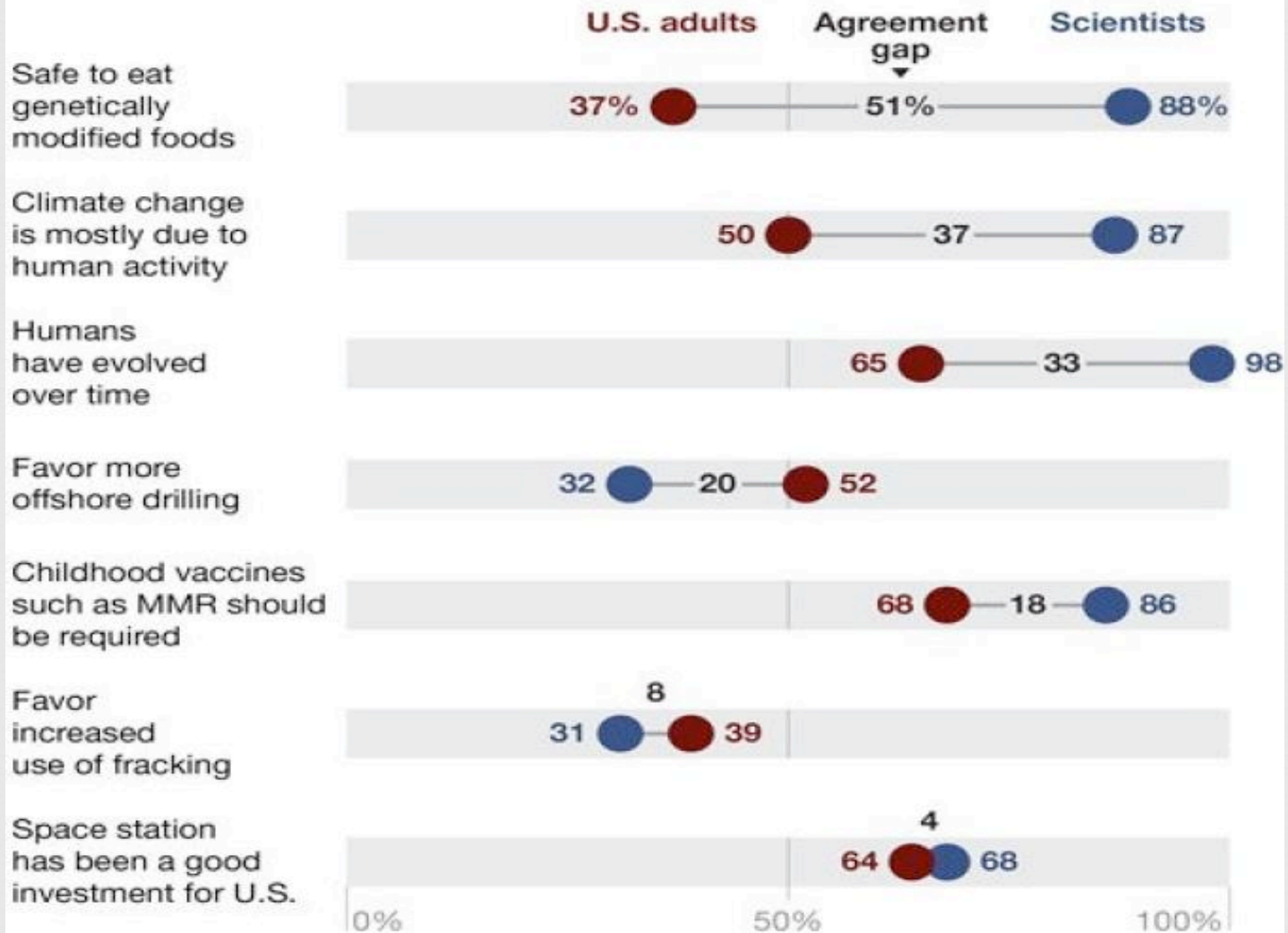
GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD IS EVIL

THE WAR ON SCIENCE



Opinion differences between the public and scientists

Percentage agreeing with statement



Survey of U.S. adults done Aug. 15-25, 2014 (error rate of +/- 3.1%).
Survey of AAAS scientists done Sept. 11-Oct. 13, 2014 (error rate of +/- 1.7%).

St. Augustine (354-430)



- ✧ The Bible cannot be properly understood as affirming as true what the natural sciences teach us is false.
- ✧ If a Biblical passage refers to natural phenomena in a way that contradicts the findings of science, one should defer to the latter.



St. Augustine



- ✧ For example: Augustine said that when Genesis describes a “light” created before the Sun and the Moon, we know that this particular passage does not refer to physical light because physicists show us that physical light requires a luminous source.
- ✧ The same applies in the modern period to the Biblical description of the sun “rising” in the west (Is 59:19), etc.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)



- ☞ Truths of science cannot contradict the truths of faith.
- ☞ God is the author of all truth and whatever reason discovers to be true about reality ought not to be challenged by an appeal to sacred texts.



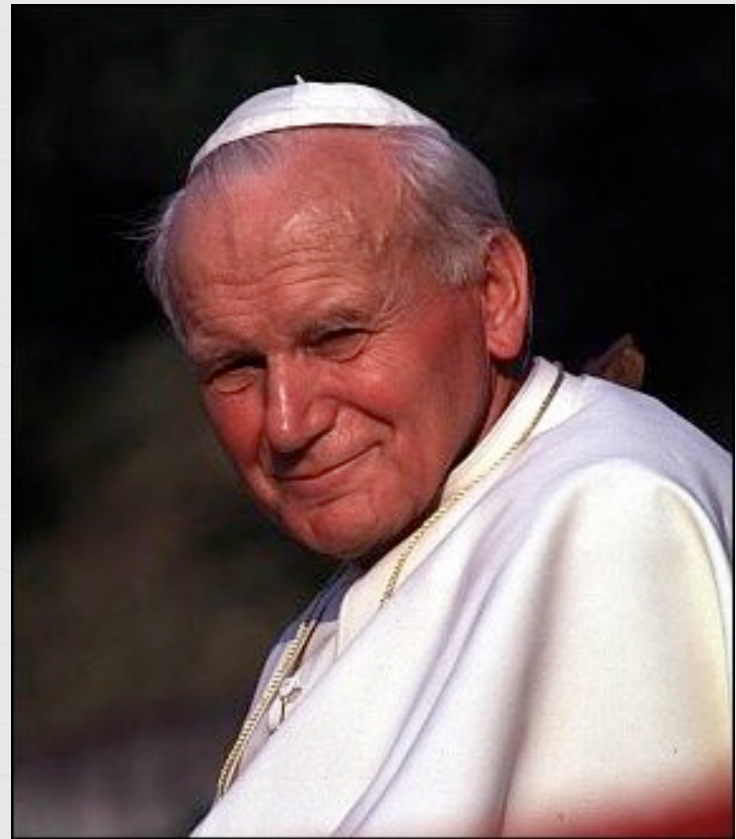
Pope St. John Paul II



Faith and science complement one another:

"Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish."

Letter to George Coyne, 1988



Key Catholic ethical principles



1. Protection of human life and dignity
2. Justice in promotion of the common good
3. The virtue of solidarity: responsibility for one another
4. Freedom as responsible self-determination and civic participation rather than simply radical autonomy
5. Stewardship for human communities, habitats, and the planet as a whole
6. Preferential option for the poor: we must assign the highest priority to the most disadvantaged, globally as well as locally – climate change burdens the poor disproportionately
7. Moral decisions through the virtue of prudence

US bishops on global climate change



“In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. **Significant levels of scientific consensus** – even in a situation with less than full certainty, where the consequences of not acting are serious – justifies, indeed **can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential dangers...** [If] enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind's well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.”

Catholics and climate change



- ☞ 83 percent of Catholics would endorse an international agreement aimed at “reducing the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.”
- ☞ 35 percent saw it “as part of an obligation to protect God’s creation”
- ☞ 44 percent saw it as an important goal but not “in terms of an obligation to protect God’s creation”
- ☞ 20 percent did not see preventing climate change as “an important goal.”

Five ways one might oppose climate science



1. *Not knowing* the scientific arguments but siding with one's own experts

- ✎ This might work if one's experts represent a position that other scientists acknowledge as scientifically credible;

2. Rejecting scientific claims on *scientific* grounds

- ✎ This works if one has scientific arguments that discredit, on publicly accessible and scientifically valid grounds, the scientific position one opposes.

3. Knowing the scientific arguments but rejecting them on *moral* grounds

- ✎ Guilt by association: climate change arguments may be made by pro-choice, pagan or socialist organizations
- ✎ This is based on a category mistake: moral objections pertain to how we choose to use scientific findings, not on the findings themselves; to be aligned with an organization on one issue does not imply agreement with its overall agenda.

Five ways one might oppose climate science



4. Knowing the scientific arguments but rejecting them on *theological* grounds

- ✧ There is no Catholic theological basis for rejecting climate science and, on contrary, there are strong Catholic grounds for taking them with utter seriousness.

5. Knowing the scientific findings but rejecting them on *political* grounds

- ✧ Responding to the over-centralization of political power in big government
- ✧ But scientific findings as such do not dictate social policy
- ✧ And a political goal does not warrant ignoring or denying scientific findings, particularly when it comes to something as important as climate change

Catholic politicians against climate science



1. “The jury is out.”

- ☞ Paul Ryan: Asked whether human-caused climate change is real: “I don’t know the answer to that question. I don’t think science does, either.”

2. Climate scientists are either **incompetent** or **politically biased**

- ☞ Mick Mulvaney (R-SC)
- ☞ House Speaker John Boehner: The science of climate change is “almost comical.”
- ☞ Rick Santorum: It is “patently absurd” to think we can change the climate.

3. **Just don’t believe** scientists

- ☞ Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL): “I do not believe that human activity is causing these dramatic changes to our climate the way these scientists are portraying”

4. **God’s sovereignty disallows human-generated climate change**

- ☞ Rep Virginia Foxx (R-NC): The climate is God’s creation. “Climate hawks” “think that we, human beings, have more impact on the climate and the world than God does.”

Catholic politicians against climate science



- ❧ 1, 2 and 3 are all versions of the expertise argument that ignore the scientific consensus
- ❧ 4 is a theological argument that misunderstands the nature of divine sovereignty and human stewardship
- ❧ None promote a moral or politically motivated rejection of climate science

Divine sovereignty and natural causality



The standard Catholic approach:

- ☞ God causes creatures to exist in such a way that they are the real causes of their own operations.
- ☞ God is at work in every operation of nature, but the autonomy of nature is not an indication of some reduction in God's power or activity; rather, it is an indication of His goodness. Because divine causality and creaturely causality function at fundamentally different levels, we rely upon natural science to tell us about the functioning of natural phenomena.



Divine sovereignty and human stewardship



- ❧ Stewardship is how we, as rational creatures, participate in God's creative and providential care for creation.
- ❧ Stewardship is responsibility to care for creation, not irresponsibly to dominate and exploit it.
- ❧ JP II: *"We must ... encourage and support the 'ecological conversion' which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Man is no longer the Creator's "steward", but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss."*

The challenge of cultural transformation



- ❧ Catholic climate deniers tend to be Republicans, and their emphasis on individual rights, skepticism about government, and strong resistance to regulatory mechanisms that would reduce carbon emissions makes it easy to pin the blame on them.
- ❧ But liberal Democrats who are indifferent to faith help to make devout Christians suspicious of climate science.
- ❧ New atheists who appeal to science in their polemics against religion do even more damage to public acceptance of science.
- ❧ **Science literacy correlates with polarization on climate science, not consensus:** people use science to confirm beliefs that reflect their wider worldviews.
- ❧ Simply communicating the findings of climate science will have limited effectiveness in changing attitudes that reflect **our primary group loyalties, which are social, religious, moral, and political** (D. Kahan).
- ❧ Prominent climate scientists have recently called on religious leaders to use their moral authority to challenge the “motivated reasoning” of climate skeptics and to counter their public message.

POPE FRANCIS HAS A MESSAGE
TO THE WORLD LEADERS
ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE:

**"THE TIME TO FIND
GLOBAL SOLUTIONS
IS RUNNING OUT.**

**THERE IS THEREFORE A
CLEAR, DEFINITE AND URGENT
ETHICAL IMPERATIVE
TO ACT."**



“On climate change, there is a clear, definitive and ineluctable ethical imperative to act ... The establishment of an international climate change treaty is a grave ethical and moral responsibility.”

Pope Francis (2014)

Implications



- ❧ This is a major and perhaps the central moral challenge of our time and should not be regarded a partisan political issue in which the science is up for grabs.
- ❧ Catholic priests and bishops have a responsibility to preach about the climate crisis, to educate future priests in seminaries, and to inform and form Catholics about this critical issue.
- ❧ Pope Francis' upcoming encyclical is timed to give strong support to UN deliberation on measures that must be taken to avert a potential catastrophe.

For more information:

Who's under your carbon footprint?

Catholic Climate Covenant™
Care for Creation. Care for the Poor.

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WHO'S UNDER YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT?
[watch the video](#)

The impact of climate change falls heaviest on the world's poor. As Catholics, our faith demands prudent action.

Our cars and power plants, more energy consumption and waste—we're leaving a bigger carbon footprint. Scientists tell us that means more climate change. Here and around the



YOUR FIRST STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION
TAKE THE ST. FRANCIS PLEDGE
TO CARE FOR CREATION AND THE POOR

Join Catholics taking action in our families, parishes, schools and communities to reduce our carbon footprint, care for "the least of these" (Mt 25) and raise our voice on behalf of Creation and the poor.

PRAY + LEARN + ASSESS + ACT + ADVOCATE

PRAY and reflect on the duty to care for God's Creation and protect the poor and vulnerable.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

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Calling All Scholars!
The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, the United States Conference of

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RELIGION AND THE ROOTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL

Katharine Hayhoe, *Texas Tech University*
response by Stephen Pope, *Boston College*

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