

Denying Denial

Romans 8:18-23; Revelation 21:1-6

This past Friday could well be one of the more momentous days of recent memory for reasons most people will not have noted. It's even possible that future generations may look back on April 22—Earth Day 2016—as one of the significant turning points for human survival on this planet. Why? It was the day on which more than 170 nations signed the Paris agreement on climate change, including (for the first time) most of the world's leading polluters, i.e., Russia, China, India, and the United States. It's certainly a positive step forward, as Bill McKibben (a leading voice in the environmental movement) recognized, though it needs to be “a floor and not a ceiling” in terms of coordinated efforts to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide from fossil fuels along with other pollutants that have damaged the earth's atmosphere almost beyond repair.

What's odd is that there was very little news coverage of this in the US. Most of what we hear tends to be critical of treaties like these, with disparaging comments about the United Nations, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the whole campaign to address climate change. Yet, on the grassroots level, concern over the environment is relatively high, as evidenced by a poll released last week that “found 94 percent of Americans believe our planet is warming and 87 percent that humans contribute at least a little bit to climate change.”¹ Apparently, it would seem if you're not onboard with the intent of this climate agreement, then you are in a distinct minority.

That's not to say climate change “deniers” aren't a vocal minority. They, in fact, get a great deal more media coverage than their numbers

¹Nick Visser, “Most of Us Believe in Global Warming, But That's Not Enough to Stop It,” *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2016.

justify. Political critics show up in most media discussions on the topic and are treated as credibly as the scientists doing the research or mining the data. Yet, from every credible scientific source, the effects of climate change are hard to refute or deny given the substantial evidence we are seeing in the frequency of intense storms, rising sea levels, melting glaciers and ice caps, higher concentrations of greenhouse gases in the air, record average temperatures, and increased solar energy retention in the atmosphere. Despite last year's terrible winter, 2015 came out as the hottest year on record as far as global temperatures are concerned—15 out of the 16 warmest years have occurred since 2000. The National Geographic even recently posted research showing that the rotation of the planet has shifted slightly as a loss of arctic ice and decreased water supplies around the globe have altered the earth's distribution of mass, enough to impact its axis.² Much of this data won't be disputed by deniers. What is, though, is the widely-held conclusion that human activity is mainly responsible for these changes.

To be fair to all sides, climatologists agree that there are a number of variables which ultimately factor into rising temperatures in the earth's atmosphere, but overwhelmingly the opinion is, the crucial link has been the introduction of fossil fuels in the past 150 years, during which CO₂ levels have risen astronomically off the charts. There are no "natural" phenomena or causes for such a dramatic increase over such a limited period of time. This accounts for why over 95% of the world's climatologists conclude that human activity is mainly responsible. Not surprising, those who oppose this conclusion often come from the

²Brian Clark Howard, "Climate Change is Moving the North Pole," *NationalGeographic.com*, April

industries or regions most invested in fossil fuel production (oil and coal, in particular).

Now it's hard not to see the politics and propaganda generated on this topic. Those of us who attended the MAEC screening of the film, *Merchants of Doubt*, last Sunday evening saw a well-presented documentary on the tactics used by "deniers" to discredit the science around climate change and its clarion call for action. Interestingly, the tactics of denial are very similar to those employed by the tobacco industry to discredit decades of scientific research showing the dangers of smoking to human health—some of the condemning data provided by the companies own research. In spite of the scientific and medical consensus, a paper trail reveals tobacco company executives and their supporting cast made concerted efforts to downplay or dismiss health concerns or purposely deceive the public purely out of economic interests. One can't help but wonder if a similar game plan is being used by Big Oil and coal interests today. That's what seems to be behind the politics of denial.

That said, most people prefer to view this in a much more practical way. Consensus rarely is possible on a number of things in life, yet that doesn't stop people from making changes—sometimes wholesale ones—on a micro and macro level. Look at what happened to tobacco use once the health concerns became evident and overwhelming. Similar things have occurred with food and drug warnings, car safety, potential cancer risks, and just about anything else in life. We alter our behaviors in response to warnings about consequences.

As far as the environment goes, we're all more conscious of toxins in the environment, we clean up our streets and communities, we recycle, we drive more fuel efficient cars, we invest in green energy, and the like.

Politics aside, we respond in practical ways with conservation and innovation to improve the long-term welfare of our lives and our environment. It simply makes sense to do this given what we know, whereas it makes no sense to live in denial. We deny denial by doing what we can to save the planet.

However, there is an element of denial that isn't addressed as much as it should be, i.e., how being "green" is often a matter of cultural and economic privilege. To put it bluntly, being green is a luxury many cannot afford. Impoverished people, for instance, will argue they are concerned more about their own immediate survival than with the long-term future of the planet. Even those with modest means can't afford to opt for green technology (e.g., solar panels, choosing power suppliers, etc.), which is a significant point of resistance. Economics plays a big role in environmental advocacy. All of this is only further complicated by the social realities of a global economy.

This became apparent to me a few years ago when I was leading a workshop at the Global Baptist Peace Conference in Rome on environmental issues, which was attended by people from different stations and locations around the world. One, in particular, was from Indonesia, where he cited the widespread environmental damage caused by flooding and landslides during recent rainy seasons. All of this was due to expansive deforestation occurring in his region. How did this come about? The mass deforestation was due to multinational corporations (e.g., IKEA) harvesting hardwoods. It so happened that in the workshop was a Swede, who had no idea this "environmentally friendly" Swedish company was creating this ecological crisis in Indonesia (nor did I when we bought a bed from IKEA!). Yet, in a matter of minutes, many of us in the room realized at some level

we were all participating in supporting this ongoing ecological disaster in Indonesia. That's the nature of the global economy! That also illustrates how complicated environmental action is—it forces us to alter our thinking about a number of things we do in life.

A similar reality check came to me from our friends in Chiapas, Mexico, where many of the Mayan villages struggle against the domination of the Mexican state and the North American economy, particularly in the wake of NAFTA. Remote villages that were traditional and self-sustaining had their lands and resources exploited by outside economic interests, including multinational energy, pharmaceutical, and mining corporations—all of which serve the U.S. and global consumers. After NAFTA, many of the local subsistence farmers no longer had a market for their corn, even regionally, as less expensive corn from the U.S. and Canada flooded the Mexican market and depressed prices. The tradeoff was supposed to be widespread development, but it was done without the intentional engagement with villagers and mostly through rich Mexican landowners and ranchers, who often exploited Mayans out of their ancestral lands.

Though development has come with a modicum of improvement in most villages with some limited healthcare and Mexican currency to better integrate Mayan villagers into the national economy, it has actually created more loss than gain. River water has become polluted with overuse of fertilizers; bottled water and carbonated drinks like Coke are amply supplied, but result in plastic bottles strewn everywhere behind houses and along roads because no one planned for proper disposal or recycling in these remote villages. Likewise, limited electrical power has resulted in more cellphones and a handful of personal TVs, but not a higher overall quality of life for Mayans. All in all, sustainable development respectful of

local people, customs, and traditions has been less forthcoming than was promised in the exchange.

It's not as if this is unique or new. In a book published 25 years ago titled, *Grassroots Environmental Action: People's Participation in Sustainable Development*, the authors make this clear: "The 'green' agenda is not simply about the environment *outside human control*; it is about the implications for social relations of bringing the environment within human control."³ They note three points of resistance to environmental action among those in developing countries and often among the lower income and rural people of developed countries.

The first is opposition to exploitation by outsiders, who come into their setting and rob them of their natural resources. The second is the resistance to political domination, where outsiders confer upon themselves a superior sense of value over local people. The third is "the refusal to be subordinated to a world view dominated by essentially alien values and assumptions mark[ing their] resistance against subjection."⁴ Frankly, environmental activism has been generated out of Western cultures and societies and, like the missionary enterprise, imposed upon settings that are not given much respect or power to control their social or natural environment.

Sometimes, those of us who are advocates for environmental action decry the deniers who dismiss what seems so obvious for economic gain; yet, we as well are denying the impact of our own economic interests and consumption and we can fail to see how "going green" is an exercise of

³Dharam Ghai & Jessica M. Vivian, eds., *Grassroots Environmental Action: People's Participation in Sustainable Development*, Routledge, 1992, pg. 32.

⁴*Ibid.* pg. 34.

privilege and power over those who don't have a living standard that can support it. Denial is a universal problem.

What this tells me is that care for the environment is only part of the overall consciousness and appreciation for global human welfare. Concerted action is warranted and even more critical for those in industrial countries, such as the U.S. and China, where manufacturing, waste disposal, transportation, and general living standards have stressed and damaged the delicate balance we have with Nature and our supply of resources. Against that interest and demand is our collective materialism and consumption—a way of life that presumes that if we can't supply our own needs, it is our economic and political right to exploit some other setting of their land, air, water, and resources. Global economics is a real problem if we want integrity in our claim to save the planet. We are denying our own denial if we can't grasp that there is a real cost to conservation. Our assumption about consumption is likely the biggest challenge to sustaining the ecological balance on this planet!

All of this is very complicated, I know, especially when we try to balance economic interests with environmental impact and limitations, but that is where the focus needs to be—not just in trying to innovate or recycle our way to sustainable living.

For me, that's the real issue lying at the heart of the Paris agreement. It's a social and economic contract that we make with the rest of the human race to improve everyone's lives as well as our mutual environments by denying no one the right to a quality of life in their own place on this planet.

When I read this morning's text from Revelation 21 earlier in the week, I grappled with its meaning as, on the surface, it seems to imply that it's about replacing one world with another—as if to say the present world is

ultimately disposable. That, I think, is part of the problem and why a mindset exists that, somehow, in the end, God will bail us out with a new world.

But that's not what this text is about. The writer envisioned a day when all of the corruption, injustice, and exploitation that plagued so much of the Roman world, especially in the setting of the then destroyed city of Jerusalem three decades earlier, would someday be replaced by a new Jerusalem and a new world. How would that restoration and renewal come about? It wouldn't come simply by rebuilding walls or repopulating it with new people. It was a matter of transforming the hearts of people who do populate it and ending all that politically, economically, and morally corrupts and damages the planet and its inhabitants—ending warfare and racial division, overcoming social injustice and economic exploitation, being good stewards of creation, and ridding society of moral and religious hypocrisy. In other words, to not continue the patterns of behavior that destroy the integrity of God's creation. That is the only way there would be meaning in these words:

...and God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

That's what it takes to save this planet. That's what it takes to transform the world into something that is truly new and renewed. It doesn't literally come down out of the heavens, but it rises up out of heaven's influence upon our lives and our consciences and our commitment to do good for each other, not just for ourselves.

As the Bishops of the Lambeth conference so eloquently state:

We believe this is God's 'oikoumene' [economy], God's world and we need to walk lightly and humbly within and upon it. We are stewards of that which comes from and returns to God. We believe that all of life is precious and indeed that God has

so designed creation that for one part to flourish all must flourish. Further, we believe that God has created the world in balance: land and water, light and darkness, evening and morning, sowing and reaping, winter and summer, birth and death, belong together; to exploit one to the detriment of another is to put all in jeopardy." ⁵

The world is beckoning for a hopeful future. May we contribute our part as conscientious consumers, passionate humanitarians, environmentally-protective stewards, and Spirit-inspired followers of the One who proclaimed, "I am making all things new."

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⁵From the [Statement on Safeguarding the Integrity of Creation](#) from concerned **Bishops at the Lambeth Conference**, August 2008.