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Summoning the Courage: Arising to the Ethical Challenge of Climate Change

By [Rock Ethics Institute](#) on January 11, 2009 5:54 AM | [1 Comment](#)

Editor's Preface. From time to time, ClimateEthics.org has argued that climate change creates civilization challenging moral and ethical issues that can only be solved when citizens and nations see their responsibilities as global citizens. See, for example. Ethical Principles Governing the Basic Foundations on Climate Change Policies, <http://climateethics.org/?p=40>, Collaborative Program on Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change Calls for Ethical Leadership in Poznan, Poland Climate Change Negotiations/<http://climateethics.org/?cat=1>, Nations Must Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions To Their Fair Share of Safe Global Emissions Without Regard To What Other Nations Do , <http://climateethics.org/?p=37> The following post written by Tahiri Naylor, Representative, United Nations Office Baha'i International Community, and Peter Adriance, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the U.S. clearly articulates why courageous leadership that appeals to a vision of the oneness of humanity is urgently needed to guide global responses to climate change.

I. Introduction

The global community stands at a critical juncture as it decides how to deal with the potentially irreversible impacts of climate change on humanity and the environment. On the one hand, the COP-14 meeting in Poznan, Poland and COP-15 in Copenhagen, Denmark represent an unparalleled opportunity to reach new levels of cooperation—cooperation that is built on a growing unity of thought on the imperative of reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) globally. Governing bodies, civil society and concerned citizens around the world have rallied to raise awareness about this common challenge. Decades of research, advocacy and policy-making have also provided a strong scientific basis for action on climate change, have raised public consciousness and have provided norms and principles to guide actions. These efforts are remarkable at many levels.

On the other hand, decision-making and climate policy development continue to be largely shaped by limited, nationalist perspectives that inhibit progress. The quest for solutions on this issue will be handicapped unless the climate change challenge is viewed from a more global vantage point. In fact, consequences may well be dire unless climate change negotiations transition from a state-centered model to one rooted in the unity which connects us as the inhabitants of one biosphere, the citizens of one world and the members of one human civilization. Just as critically, a global response to climate change must be capable of resolving a number of underlying ethical and moral issues. Difficult questions about justice, equity, responsibility and obligation remain to be addressed. The world's spiritual and faith-based traditions have a vital role to play in fostering that dialogue, as do courageous leaders who will make these ethical questions central to their deliberations.

II. The Oneness of Humanity

Climate change is a global challenge. As such, any effective climate change policy will need to be rooted in a global perspective and based on a moral ethic grounded in shared responsibility. The principle of the oneness of humankind must become the ruling principle of international life—applied to climate change as to other critical global challenges facing our planet. This principle does not seek to undermine national autonomy or suppress cultural or religious diversity. Rather, it provides an opportunity to see the climate change debate through a new lens—one that perceives humanity, in all its diversity, as a unified whole, not unlike the cells of the human body, which are differentiated in form and function, but united in a common purpose (Baha'i International Community, 2008). It is only through applying this unifying principle that the momentum, support and capacity will be built to find solutions to the climate change challenge.

Governments largely acknowledge the global dimensions of climate change, but this enlargement of the sphere of responsibility has not sufficiently moved them to act. Policymakers, too, may frequently voice principles related to our common humanity, but these principles are rarely central to decision-making or integrated into policies. Decisions are still primarily taken on a state-centered model—a model in which states attempt to bargain their way to a solution based on



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MONTHLY ARCHIVES

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- [July 2010 \(1\)](#)
- [June 2010 \(2\)](#)

their own limited economic and national self interests.

The Kyoto Protocol is a case in point. Entering into force in 1994, it facilitated, among other provisions, the development of monitoring institutions and led to agreements on establishing emissions trading regimes and mechanisms that promoted clean technologies in developing countries. The Kyoto Protocol did not, however, gain the support of the world's largest emitters. As such, it remained weak and has had limited impacts on overall reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.

To overcome these weaknesses and the anticipated, adverse impacts of climate change in the years ahead, bold action is needed. Newly adopted agreements must include universal participation, with binding emissions commitments from all countries and the development of institutions and enforcement mechanisms to see that those commitments are reached. Far from a constraint on national sovereignty, it is only this global approach that will guarantee that abatement targets will be reached to the greater benefit of all.

Ethicists have shed some light on what these targets should be, noting that "various ethical systems converge in the conclusion that atmospheric levels of GHGs should be stabilized at the lowest possible levels above existing atmospheric GHG concentrations" (Brown, et al, 2005). But, even this minimum goal does not take unanticipated and nonlinear responses to the climate system into account. To avoid the potential harms associated with climate change, GHG emissions must be reduced significantly. Scientists are advocating reductions of 60-80 percent globally by 2050. From the moral perspective of ensuring the value and quality of life for both current and future generations, the international community needs to set courageous goals. The alternative to bold targets and a binding, universally-adopted framework is continued political stalemate, rising CO2 emissions, and the increasing economic, environmental and social risks that increasing emissions imply.

III. A Matter of Equity

It is well established that many of those who will be harmed most by climate change have neither markedly contributed to causing the problem, nor do they have the ability to pay for adaptation measures. Indeed, the world's poorest and most vulnerable people are expected to suffer some of the worst effects of climate change. Because the destructive impacts of climate change are exacerbated by the extremes of wealth and poverty, there is a profound need for new approaches centered on the ethical values of justice and equity.

An ethical approach to this matter impels questions such as: Who is most responsible for the consequences of climate change? Who should pay for the damages? How can developing countries pursue social and economic development without emitting dangerously high levels of GHGs? And, how can some populations reduce excessive consumption and direct resources toward more sustainable models?

Debates over climate change raise "profound questions of distributive justice because climate change impacts will not be distributed equally, because nations and peoples have different responsibilities for current levels of GHGs in the atmosphere, and because nations and peoples are differentially vulnerable to climate change impacts" (Brown, et al, 2005). The international community must not only take responsibilities towards human communities into consideration, but also the need to protect the diverse range of plants, animals and ecosystems upon which humanity's survival depends.

Although there are a number of specific proposals on how to ensure equitable allocations of GHG emissions, most ethical perspectives and religious traditions would assert that those using a preponderant share of the world's resources must be responsible for assuming the costs associated with their consumption. Developing nations may soon surpass developed nations in total GHG emissions, but per capita emissions in developed countries are likely to continue to exceed those of other countries in the immediate term (Brown, 2008). Furthermore, developed nations remain responsible for the majority of past and current emissions. Based on well-established principles of distributive justice, any nation exceeding its share of emissions has an ethical duty—in light of impacts on its neighbors—to reduce those emissions to safe levels. The White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change, which was based on the input of leading ethicists, also notes that uncertainty about the potential harm of risky behavior, uncertainty about costs, or uncertainty about what other countries are doing are all morally unjustifiable reasons for refusing to take needed action on climate change.

While leadership by those countries with higher emissions and an "ability to pay" is particularly critical, a sustainable future remains in the interests of all. Developing nations also have an obligation to control emissions and move to sustainable practices to better satisfy the basic needs of their citizens and to ensure the quality of life for current and future generations.

The challenge before the world community, then, is not just a technical one, but a moral one. Thoughts and behaviors need to be transformed to allow our economic and social structures to extend the benefits of sustainable development to all. In short, humanity is in this together. Again, achieving an equitable response to the challenge of climate change is unlikely without seeing ourselves as one human family and recognizing our deep interdependence. With that principle as the bedrock of any future agreements on climate change, the international community can reach a new stage in its collective evolution.

IV. Ensuring Full Participation

Whatever targets the international community ultimately agrees to, an ethical approach requires

February 2010 (2)
January 2010 (1)
December 2009 (3)
November 2009 (1)
October 2009 (8)
September 2009 (2)
August 2009 (4)
June 2009 (1)
May 2009 (1)
April 2009 (2)
February 2009 (1)
January 2009 (5)
December 2008 (2)
October 2008 (1)
August 2008 (1)
July 2008 (3)
June 2008 (3)
May 2008 (1)
April 2008 (1)
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that the process of decision-making must be as inclusive as possible. Those most vulnerable to climate change, for example, must be consulted and brought fully into the process. To date, many of those who are the most likely to be harmed by climate change have not been embraced as full partners in shaping climate change policies. More inclusive and consultative approaches will be a critical harbinger of success over the long term, especially as policies are implemented.

Attention to the gender dimensions of climate change is also a high priority. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Largely responsible for securing food, water and energy for cooking and heating in many parts of the world, the scarcity of resources arising from climate change will intensify a woman's burden. Women also, however, represent great untapped potential in addressing the challenge of climate change. Their responsibilities in families, in communities, as farmers and as stewards of natural resources make them uniquely positioned to develop strategies for both mitigating the causes and adapting to the effects of changing environmental conditions.

Neither the principal legal nor scientific framework guiding climate change negotiations—the UNFCCC and the Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—makes reference to gender. The recent decision by the UNFCCC secretariat to appoint a gender focal point is a positive step, but member states can go further by including a gender component in national reports to the UNFCCC and by putting gender experts on UNFCCC delegations. These steps must be reinforced by efforts to amplify the voices of women in all areas of human endeavor.

Finally, religious communities can give significant support to climate change dialogues. Faith-based communities are generally among the strongest advocates for environmental justice. Not only can their views on ethics, human rights and distributive justice inform negotiations, but they are at the forefront of educating their communities, providing a scriptural basis for action, and leading or participating in efforts at national and international levels (Posas, 2007). At deeper spiritual levels, nearly all faith-based traditions place a high value on a responsibility for stewardship of the earth and offer the long-term ethical and spiritual perspectives that will be required for individuals, communities and countries to move beyond the narrow self interest that has often been at the center of climate change deliberations.

V. Conclusion

The Baha'i International Community is pleased to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the ethical dimensions of climate change and hopes to see the aforementioned principles become central to policymakers' thinking as negotiations go forward. Discourses on science and religion are integral to direct human energies to the resolution of the problem at hand—science for an objective and systematic approach and religion for the moral impetus that will motivate action for the common good. Climate change negotiations represent an important opportunity to have a conversation—a rapprochement—between these two sources of knowledge and understanding of our complex world.

Above all, the time is at hand for policymakers to take a global ethical perspective on climate change. The time has passed for piecemeal solutions. Rather, the world waits for courageous leadership to take bold, fair, and far-reaching measures to ensure a sustainable future for all humanity.

By:

Tahirih Naylor
Representative, United Nations Office
Baha'i International Community
tnaylor@bic.org
212-803-2500

Peter Adriance
NGO liaison
National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the U.S.
padriance@usbnc.org
202-833-8990

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1 COMMENT

[jameslouvre](#) | January 11, 2009 7:33 AM | [Reply](#)

My Reply

I congratulate Tahirih Naylor, Representative, United Nations Office of Baha'i International Community, for expressing, so eloquently on YouTube and in this article, her own and her organization's deep concerns for the fate of current and future generations, and the obligation we all have to share in the work of reducing greenhouse gas emissions before we pass that invisible environmental tripping point toward which we are accelerating at breakneck speed, and beyond which lies the collapse of one natural system after another in a grand, irreversible, terminal disaster..

I beseech the leaders of all the diverse faith communities throughout the world to put aside differences and unite in one worldwide movement to mobilize every element of human society in the most urgent cause ever to face humanity.

They are perhaps the most able to create a unifying wave of fervor that can sweep away apathy and provincialism and energize every country and every faction in every country to reduce the greenhouse gas outpouring that our own God-given cleverness has created.

How the Problem Evolved

In our quest for more and more ease and comfort, a "heaven on earth," we have become dependent upon carbon based technologies that have until recently seemed to promise a "good life" for everyone in the world, eventually. Instead, the fumes from our technology have given us an ever more dense blanket around the planet that is increasing daily in a manner unprecedented in humanity's long presence on earth..

For all their diversity, religions, like other comprehensive doctrines, share one overarching ethical precept, the Golden Rule, and just as that rule arches laterally to embrace all human populations everywhere; it also arches forward to embrace all future generations. Because global warming and the stresses it imposes on Planet Earth are world wide and potentially everlasting, we can no longer base our morals on provincial or even national, regional, or hemispherical well being, comfort, or "economic development," nor can we limit our responsibility to people of our own times. It is now time for global vision, and intergenerational justice. We must not only protect the people and resources, living and non-living, that are under stress right now; we must leave children of the future a Planet Earth that is a fit place to live. Let us call the children of these future generations "the WAUG Kids," members of the What About Us? Generations, children with no voice, no advocates, no lobbyists, not Political Action Committees or religious hierarchy crying out to us, yet we are the people they may one day condemn as the "GDN" Generation, the Great Do Nothing Generation.

Who will beg for mercy, compassion, and responsibility for these most defenseless persons? By a simple accident of future birth they are vulnerable to the catastrophes that our neglect of global warming will cause.

Like the prophets of old, religious leaders must rise to speak up, not only for today's most vulnerable populations, such as the people of Bangladesh, where global warming and rising seas threaten a third of their territory, but for those to be born in 2040, or 2060, and well beyond.

The Stumbling Block

Sadly, while most religious leaders are highly knowledgeable about sacred texts and religious laws, few of them are sophisticated about science. Thus most may be skeptical finding the technical jargon and mathematical expressions scientists use hard to comprehend. They may as yet have little faith in the findings that suggest that God has placed in man's hands not only the responsibility for husbanding the livestock, fisheries, and fields of grain that feed the world, but that he also laid upon man's shoulders the responsibility for husbanding the entire Planet.

Nonetheless, religious leaders must welcome the information gathered by experts in the natural sciences and integrate it with their own world views. Only then will they really appreciate the magnitude of our current global crisis, and only that will be enough prompt them to join in a worldwide union of leaders to fashion the enormous change in human understanding that will bring about the end of Planetary degradation and spark a commitment of all peoples to reversing the universal and apocalyptic realities that we now face on the secular level.

It's not just about polar bears and penguins, ski slopes and seaside cities, butterflies and bees anymore; it's about the future of Earth as a habitable planet for humans and the eighty percent of species of plants and animals that may disappear forever before the year 2100. Together, most of them have shared the interglacial warm period with us for thousands of years. But now, while even some rocket scientists at NASA have not comprehended how

threatened Earth is, everyone, especially those religious leaders with the power to shape people's values and choices must arm themselves with scientific understanding and good counsel if they are to fulfill their obligations to our current neighbors and the as-yet- unborn WAUG kids of the rest of this century and beyond.

James Louviere, Belmont, Massachusetts
louviere2001@yahoo.com

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