



Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, two of Christianity's most important leaders, and strong proponents of action on climate change. Photo by Nir Hason in 2014, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2stdb0f>

Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic—or human caused—climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Christians work tirelessly to change their habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Christian environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Christians described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Christian.

As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Christianity and UN Climate Accords

The diverse, massive Christian church, which claims nearly one third of the world as members—over 2.2 billion people worldwide—has surprising institutional unity regarding climate change. Leaders representing the vast majority of Christians globally have stated that climate change is not only real and human caused, but that it requires urgent response. When the UN held its landmark Climate Accords in 2015 in Paris—known by the shorthand COP 21—many Christian leaders spoke loudly in favor of the agreement.

Leading voices of all three major branches of Christianity—Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy—took part in these efforts. In the lead up to COP 21, Pope Francis, head of the Roman Catholic Church, published a papal encyclical entitled: *Laudato Si*. In this detailed theological letter, the Pope laid out Catholic doctrine as it pertains to climate change. Using scientific and theological arguments, Pope Francis called on the world to fight climate change and “escape the spiral of self destruction which currently engulfs us.”¹ The encyclical caused major discussion during the negotiations in Paris, and it was even rumored that Pope Francis made personal phone calls to the leaders of Catholic majority nations in order to secure global passage of the agreement.²

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the Eastern Orthodox church, addressed COP 21, saying that it was a “moral obligation to engage actively in favor of environmental protection as the manifestation of a Christian ethos... we are all in agreement.”³

Most Protestants also lent their voices in support of the accords. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, head of the global Anglican Communion, signed a declaration stating there was an “urgent need for action on climate change,” encouraging the world to agree to “a legally-binding commitment at the international Climate Change talks in Paris.”⁴

¹ Francis I, *Laudato Si*, Encyclical letter on care for our common home, The Vatican, May 24, 2015.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

² Roger Harrabin, “COP 21: Did the Pope save the climate deal?” *BBC News*, Dec. 13, 2015.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35087220>

³ Bartholomew, *Ecumenical Prayer for the Preservation of Creation*, Encyclical to COP 21, World Council of Churches, Dec. 3, 2015.

⁴ “Lambeth Declaration 2015 on Climate Change,” *The Church of England*, June 17, 2015. <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2015/06/archbishop-of-canterbury-join-faith-leaders-in-call-for-urgent-action-to-tackle-climate-change.aspx>

Martin Junge, president of the Lutheran World Federation, said Lutherans would “demand decisive steps to address climate change.”⁵ Many evangelical leaders also joined these calls. Bishop Efraim Tendero, secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, representing nearly 600 million Evangelicals around the globe, called for a “binding” agreement to “bring about taking care of this universe that God has given to us.”⁶ These are only a few of countless statements from Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic leaders in support of a binding agreement. Of course, it is important to remember that individual Christians may or may not agree with the statements of their leaders, but global Christian leadership spoke loudly in favor of the accords.

Still, despite strong institutional support, there were some Christians who opposed the negotiations at COP 21. For example, many conservative Evangelicals in the United States opposed the agreement. Some believed climate accords to be unnecessary; theologically, they believed that if a global cataclysm was at hand, God would intervene to protect them. Others who held millennialist beliefs mistrusted any global agreements. Millennialists believe that the end of the world is near, based on their interpretation of the biblical book of Revelation. They believe that the formation of a global government is the part of the apocalypse, so they feared that worldwide cooperation could lead to “a coalition that may someday facilitate the rise of the Antichrist,” a figure of evil that they believe will try to take over the world.⁷ Others believe that the scientific community is anti-Christian, and thus treat their findings with deep skepticism.⁸

On December 12, 2015, the Paris Agreement was signed by 195 of 197 member states. Most Christian leaders across the globe celebrated the passage of the accords as a great moral and theological achievement, and pledged to help communities implement the agreement.⁹

Christians have continued to make their voices heard on climate change since the accords were signed in 2015. On June 1, 2017, newly elected President Donald Trump announced that the United States would leave the Paris Accords. Though some Evangelical leaders supported the move, most Christian leaders in the United States and across the world swiftly condemned the withdrawal, including leaders of the Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran (ELCA) churches.¹⁰ These Christian churches have pledged to continue to fight climate change and support sustainable living.



World leaders and diplomats at the negotiating table at COP 21 in Paris in 2015, forging an agreement which was largely, but not entirely, supported by Christian leaders. Photo by the US Department of State, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2tGcmAC>

⁵ “LWF joins faith communities’ call for ambitious Paris outcome,” *The Lutheran World Federation*, Oct. 20, 2015.

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-joins-faith-communities-call-ambitious-paris-outcome>

⁶ Efraim M. Tendero, *Climate Home*, Climate Change TV, Dec. 3, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnWXj5q30Ig>

⁷ Lisa Vox, “Why don’t Christian conservatives worry about climate change? God.” *The Washington Post* (Washington DC), June 2, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/06/02/why-dont-christian-conservatives-worry-about-climate-change-god/?utm_term=.38c7a2bf9921

⁸ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Why so many white evangelicals in Trump’s base are deeply skeptical of climate change,” *The Washington Post* (Washington DC), June 2, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/06/02/why-so-many-white-evangelicals-in-trumps-base-are-deeply-skeptical-of-climate-change/?utm_term=.65beb16018dd

⁹ “Paris climate agreement hailed by ecumenical leaders,” *The Lutheran World Federation*. Dec. 14, 2015.

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/paris-climate-agreement-hailed-ecumenical-leaders>

¹⁰ Bailey, “Why so many...” 2017.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- “Laudato Si,” the 2015 papal encyclical on climate change (Roman Catholic): <http://bit.ly/2rvG6PT>
- “Ecumenical Prayer for the Preservation of Creation,” by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in 2015 (Eastern Orthodox): <http://bit.ly/2sSkzFd>
- The “Lambeth Declaration 2015 on Climate Change” (Protestant-Anglican): <http://bit.ly/1Ge8tRK>
- 2015 Op-Ed from the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury (Eastern Orthodox and Protestant-Anglican): <http://nyti.ms/2sL8Icq>
- WNYC Interview with Evangelical Brandan Robertson in support of taking theological and practical action against climate change: <http://bit.ly/2sj6X4B>
- “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action” (Protestant-American Evangelical): <http://n.pr/1TbdTnl>
- “An Open Letter on Climate Change” (Protestant-American Evangelical): <http://bit.ly/2shBVdk>

Secondary Sources:

- WP on theology and climate among American Evangelicals: <http://wapo.st/2sx5oic>
- Another WP article on theology and climate among American Evangelicals: <http://wapo.st/2sxdjfp>

Discussion Questions

- How do Christian views of climate change represent internal diversity?
- Why might conservative Evangelical Christians in the United States have such a different view on climate change than most other Christians?
- Do singular Christian leaders like the Pope or the Ecumenical Patriarch speak for all of their followers? Why or why not?
- Read two of the first six primary sources which are representations of Christian leaders in favor of action on climate change. How do these letters show how different Christians will approach a topic—even one they agree on—using different beliefs and theological stances?
- Read the two open letters on climate change from American Evangelicals in the last two primary sources above. On what issues do these Evangelicals agree? On what do they disagree? How does each group theologically justify their opposing conclusions?
- Listen to the WNYC interview of Brandan Robertson in the primary sources above. How does Robertson’s answers demonstrate both internal diversity and change over time in the Evangelical tradition?