

Population Growth Divides Climate Change Advocates

By [Brentin Mock](#)

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Global warming has been described by skeptics and deniers as a religion, and not in flattering ways. But many organized religions are taking climate change seriously, as a science. And while the tensions between religion and science date back centuries, the current climate change movement acts as a playing field where an atheist like Christopher Hitchens stands in agreement with an evangelist like Rick Warren: both believe it's real and deserves urgent attention.

Not only do the two worldviews agree, but it is the religious community that, for the most part, has taken some of the more progressive stances on climate change. Faith groups have advocated that wealthy nations should financially support the world's vulnerable to adapt to the worst climate-related miseries.

Yet there is one issue that makes both camps squeamish: rapid population growth, which scientists say will make some regions even more vulnerable to climate change. Neither religious "creation care" advocates nor traditional environmentalists feel fully comfortable talking about it, and one major religious leader said it doesn't even come up for discussion.

Some environmental scientists believe that slowing down rapid population growth can help curtail carbon emissions, or at least bring certain communities out of energy poverty. The problem with proposals that sound like "population control" is they have often been delivered in racist packaging focused on reducing non-white, impoverished populations rather than wealthy, white ones, which are most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2007 synthesis report states, "The effect on global emissions of the decrease in global energy intensity during... 1970 to 2004 has been smaller than the combined effect of global income growth (77%) and global population growth (69%); both drivers of increasing energy-related CO₂ emissions." The IPCC is the United Nations Environmental Programme's lead body on climate change science, and while population isn't a major component of its authoritative reports, the group does acknowledge that regions in Africa and India with extremely dense populations are most at risk to massive suffering.

The Catholic Church has studied and worked on issues of protecting the poor from climate change disaster for at least the last ten years. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is one of four members of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment ([NRPE](#)), which also includes the [Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life](#), the National Council of Churches of Christ and the Evangelical Environmental Network ([EEN](#)). The NRPE is part of a broader non-religious coalition, the [Alliance for Climate Protection](#), whose board chairman is Al Gore, and which includes progressive groups such as [350.org](#), the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative, Green for All and the U.S. Climate Action Network.

"Never has there been such conviction and commitment across the entire denominational and ideological spectrum as there is on this issue, and not least because of its impact on those who

are most vulnerable to climate change but are the least responsible for it,” says Paul Gorman, executive director of NRPE.

But in some of those same vulnerable nations where Catholic Relief Services is often found caring for indigent communities, there are many unplanned or unwanted pregnancies—due to rape, lack of sexual and reproductive education, forbidden or faulty abortion procedures, or poor access to contraception. Most in the climate change struggle are not advocating for population control, but many agree that a reduction in unwanted pregnancies in destitute nations would help them better adapt to climate change problems. As RD contributing editor Michelle Goldberg [wrote](#) in a recent *Daily Beast* column, “Climate change isn’t a reason to force unwanted interventions on women. It’s a reason to mobilize an often-indifferent world to give women what they need.”

In a conversation with Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (CCCC), which is affiliated with the Catholic Church, he championed the “rights of women.” Misleh maintained there “has to be empowerment of women and proper education... because those are the prime causes of poverty.” But he added that empowerment would not include women’s rights to access contraception and abortion.

In the 2001 USCCB document “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good,” the bishops addressed population, stating, “We should promote a respect for nature that encourages policies fostering natural family planning and the education of women and men rather than coercive measures of population control or government incentives for birth control that violate local cultural and religious norms.”

As for rapid population growth, though, the Catholic Church is remaining what it calls “pro-life.” Misleh of the CCCC says, “Our faith says that all life is sacred and every act between man and woman has to be open to the possibility of life, so if that is our position then we can’t have artificial forms of birth control.”

Misleh defined “artificial” as the use of birth control pills and condoms as opposed to “natural” birth control, “women being aware of their cycles and men being respectful of that.”

The Vatican’s longstanding position on birth control initially stymied cooperation between religious and environmental groups, according to Father Tom Reese, a senior research fellow at Georgetown University’s Woodstock Theological Center who focuses on Catholic Church issues and public policy.

“The Catholic Church got beat up on birth control and population issues, and that pretty much scared the Catholic Church away from the environmental movement early on and really made it difficult for them to get involved,” says Reese.

But now the Catholic Church is heavily involved, despite its position on birth control, especially through its role with NRPE. According to Gorman, NRPE officials were called in by President Barack Obama’s transition team shortly after he was elected to talk about how to draft environmental legislation. Gorman says his team, which included leaders from evangelical, Jewish, and moderate Christian churches, were “stunned” to find how ill-informed congressional members were about the impact of climate change on the poor.

“Even the most pro-climate action, Democrat senators and members of Congress were

stunningly uninformed and casual, and even negligent, about the urgency and priority of addressing the needs of those vulnerable” to climate change, says Gorman.

Representatives Henry Waxman and Edward Markey, lead sponsors of the House of Representatives bill that passed this summer, were open, however, to what the faith leaders had to say about adaptation measures for developing nations. The NRPE’s behind-the-scenes advocacy can be credited, says Gorman, for financial assistance for vulnerable populations that is found in the House bill, as well as the climate debate currently being held in the Senate.

Still, the amount the House allocated for this need does not match the urgency that the faith leaders pushed for. “We were profoundly disappointed with the amount of resources that the house legislation projected to meet this challenge,” says Gorman, although he says Sen. John Kerry has pledged more.

Yet, what if that aid is used by nations to help slow population growth, by granting women in developing nations needed and wanted access to reproductive services? Gorman insists, “this has not been a part of the discussion,” either in religious or legislative negotiations. If aid was used for those purposes, though, he says, “any money spent in that area would be a diversion from funds for the immediate needs of people who are already living and who are in danger of dying from climate change.”

But if slowing rapid population growth is a non-starter—and can’t even be a part of the discussion—then who’s to say that all affected peoples’ needs are being met? The answer lies not just in population control or birth control, but rather in who has control over accepted policies for handling climate change adaptation. Perhaps poor woman in developing countries should have their own say in that.