

Religion and climate change in Australia

December 2 2015, by Jeff Atkins



Understanding how religion informs our attitudes and views on the environment and climate change is a complicated proposition. However, in light of this week's COP21 talks in Paris, it is an interesting and necessary topic of conversation. In their August, 2015 article in *PLoS ONE* entitled "Religion Does Matter for Climate Change Attitudes and Behavior", Mark Morrison, Roderick Duncan, and Kevin Parton tackle this issue in Australia through the use of an online survey that identifies respondent's views and attitudes on climate change. By parsing the data by religious affiliation, and after controlling for socio-demographics and

respondent's scientific, climate, and energy-related knowledge, the authors demonstrate differences in attitudes towards climate change and behaviors among religious groups. This study, along with being the first in Australia, is also the first to include eastern religions.

The bulk of research relating religious belief to environmental attitudes, has been in the US and Europe and focused primarily on Christian denominations. Australia makes an interesting extension. As Morrison et al. point out, on total Australia is 17th globally in carbon emissions, however it is the world's second highest per capita carbon emitter and particularly dependent on coal.

The authors surveyed 1,927 Australians, sampled across four religious groupings: 1) Secularists, which includes Atheists, Agnostics, and those with no identified religion; 2) Buddhists; 3) Christian literalists, those believe in a more literal translation of the bible; and 4) Christian non-literalists. Members of the Jewish and Muslim faiths, along with those affiliated with other religions, were excluded from the study due only to low representation in the sample. This research sought to address five questions:

- Are there different attitudes and behaviors in relation to [climate change](#) depending on [religious affiliation](#)?
- Are members of certain religious affiliations less likely than other members of the community to support climate change action?
- Does lower knowledge of climate change issues result in lower support of climate change action?
- Are there broad systems of belief that form the basis of climate change attitudes and behavior?
- Can differences in climate change attitudes and behavior be explained by beliefs in man's dominion over nature?

The 36 question survey used in the study is that same used in the Maibach et al. 2011 article "Identifying like-minded audiences for global warming public engagement campaigns: an audience segmentation analysis and tool development," published in *PLoS ONE* and can be accessed via the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication. This survey segments respondents into six categories, summarized here from Maibach et al. 2011:

1. Alarmed – those convinced global warming is occurring and who are most engaged in the conversation.
2. Concerned – those also convinced global warming is occurring, but less likely than those who are Alarmed to take action.
3. Cautious – those who believe global warming is a serious problem, but who do not view it as a personal threat.
4. Disengaged – those who have not given the issue much thought or who could easily change their minds.
5. Doubtful – those who are unsure if global warming is occurring and who if they do, often attribute it to natural forcings.
6. Dismissive – those actively engaged in the issue, but who believe [global warming](#) is not occurring and that it is not a threat.

The authors also included knowledge questions ranging from understanding of the physics of the greenhouse effect, to differences in the impacts of various forms of energy production.

The major finding is that in Australia, there are fewer people who fall into the "Alarmed" and "Concerned" segments than in the US, but similar proportions in the "Doubtful" and "Dismissive" segments. This means more Australians are considered "Disengaged" or "Cautious." This points towards the potential for the use of education programs to target these groups and develop support for more climate action among Australians.

This study is the first to add the dimension of how Buddhist beliefs affect environmental attitudes. Morrison et al. find that within their sample, Buddhists had strong support for environmental policies to combat climate change. Among the non-religious, they found similarly positive support for [climate change policy](#) and that any differences in environmental attitudes or knowledge among the non-religious were more attributable to socio-demographics. While both Buddhists and the non-religious tended to believe climate change is occurring and is a threat, the Christian literalists tended to hold opposing views. Christian non-literalists fell between the two extremes.

Of the non-religious, or Secularists, 43.8% of those sampled were either "Alarmed" or "Concerned"; among Buddhists this number rose to 45.7%. Among Christian groups, 27.5% of non-literalists and only 19.6% of literalists were either "Alarmed" or "Concerned."

While it has been suggested that differences in environmental views among religious affiliations is more an effect of political beliefs or socio-demographics, Morrison et al. find that even when these variables are explicitly included, religious affiliation is still a significant predictor of environmental attitudes.

"While significant effects were identified in this study for all religious groups relative to the non-religious group, it should be borne in mind that these effects vary in magnitude. For the Buddhists, the effects were relatively large, and positively related to climate change engagement. For the Christian literalists and Christian non-literalists the effects were negatively related to climate change engagement and were similar in magnitude and direction to the effects of a number of socio-demographic variables such as, being male or being self-employed."—Morrison et al. 2015

Much of the past research into the connections between religion and

environmental perspectives has been focused in the United States and Europe. Within Christian denominations, environmental attitudes vary widely. Mormons and Baptists err more towards an environmental view of "anthropomorphic dominance," while Episcopalians and Methodists, tend more towards a stewardship focused view. In the US, a majority of evangelical Christians believe in climate change. However, when compared to non-evangelicals, evangelicals are less likely on the whole to believe climate change is occurring, that it is in fact caused by human activity, and that there is scientific consensus. A [2014 report](#) from the Public Religion Research Institute and American Academy of Religion showed that Americans ranked climate change last among a list of important issues, behind the income gap between rich and poor, health care, and immigration reform.

These views on climate change and the environment among evangelicals, and more widely among conservative Christians who believe in a more literal translation of the bible, have been attributed to a stronger belief in man's dominion over nature, the aforementioned "anthropomorphic dominance." Or, as Morrison et al. state, "...a stronger belief in their efficacy in controlling outcomes."

However, there is a complex interaction between socio-demographics and religious affiliation to inform environmental attitudes. Morrison et al. find that though religious affiliation is strong predictor of attitudes towards climate change, this effect, though still significant, is dampened when socio-demographic data are included. In past research, there have been issues of spurious correlations between environmental outlook and religious affiliation attributed to the influence of other sociological or demographic variables affecting attitude. Outlooks on various environmental issues may have been more connected to political views and simply correlated with religious affiliation. It is an important next step to replicate this research in other countries and among other religious affiliations.

Religion is an important facet of many people lives and offers a possible unified means of addressing climate change if consensus can be built.

"Thus there remains opportunity for religious groups to do more to support the acceptance of human induced climate change and the need for policy responses, as well as action at a local level." – Morrison et al. 2015.

More information: Mark Morrison et al. Religion Does Matter for Climate Change Attitudes and Behavior, *PLOS ONE* (2015). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0134868](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0134868)

Edward W. Maibach et al. Identifying Like-Minded Audiences for Global Warming Public Engagement Campaigns: An Audience Segmentation Analysis and Tool Development, *PLoS ONE* (2011). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0017571](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0017571)

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