Divine Sovereignty and the Global Climate Change Debate

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Today, as I write this, it is the Feast of Christ the King in the Catholic Church.¹ The holiday reminds me that for many people, Jesus is still viewed as a king seated at the right hand of God—a king who will return one day to claim his kingdom.² For many Christians, divine sovereignty is assumed to be like a king’s sovereignty. Kings rule over people but are themselves not ruled; they are law-makers, and not the subjects of law. I wish to argue that this image of divine sovereignty is behind the global climate change debate as it plays out in the United States. I think this image needs to be called into question if we are ever to unite globally in order to respond to the environmental conditions that form the common good for all human beings. There is another and better way of imaging divine sovereignty, an image is built on the idea of collegiality—the idea of power-sharing.³ This alternative is more consistent with our understanding of science, the scientific enterprise, democratic political life, global cooperation, and diverse religious commitments. We can make progress in mitigating climate change only when we see that it is not just reason and the facts that are at stake in the debate, but also deep-seated collective images of the divine and of personal identity.

Exposed Emails

In a recent New York Times article, “Hacked E-Mail Is New Fodder for Climate Dispute,” Andrew Revkin reports that hundreds of private emails have been stolen by means of computer hacking from a computer server at a British university.⁴ The apparent reason these emails were pilfered is because they expose years of discussions among scientists working on global climate change science. It is assumed that the theft was done on the behalf of mostly American skeptics of global climate change. The
skeptics were looking for evidence of a scientific conspiracy to conceal evidence contrary to the published findings. Meanwhile, the emails show that the scientists are quite aware that their findings are being challenged. The skeptics, on the other hand, are being exposed as having ties to businesses whose profits derive from fossil fuels and carbon-based technologies. So it turns out, on the face of it, that the American problem with the climate debate is an issue between science and business. That, of course, is too broad a generalization to stand up to scrutiny.

**Liberal vs. Conservative Politics**

In the political sphere in the United States, Democrats and Republicans tend to clash over climate change. Liberals and Democrats see global climate change as an issue that only government policy can solve. Some of those policies would very likely include carbon emission restrictions, which would impinge on businesses. Republicans, on the other hand, tend to believe that global climate change is a non-issue (because many Republicans doubt global warming is actually happening), or that it isn’t caused by human factors, or that it is something that the free market economy will take care of—business will switch to more efficient products when consumers demand them. For many Republicans, more government involvement is not the solution.

Republicans and Democrats alike, however, are constrained by a legal and ethical framework, the US Constitution, and by a shared political obligation, the welfare of the American people. Republicans and Democrats must orient themselves on the constraints of this framework and the demands of this obligation. They are equally bound by the Constitution and public service, and hence are under the Constitution and under public service equally. In this way the US Constitution can be interpreted to establish a kind of collegial egalitarianism, which helps to solve the American problem with the climate debate.

**Science/Democrat vs. Business/Republican**

Why is it that over global climate change, Democrats appear to be aligned with science and Republicans with business? I think what is really at stake in the climate debate is our fundamental understanding of divine sovereignty. Divine sovereignty is imaged and understood either on the model of kingship, or as collegial cooperation. What is fundamentally at issue here is not socialism contra capitalism, but rather the very nature of the divine, and hence also the vision of optimal human flourishing.

**Divine Sovereignty**

One way to view divine sovereignty is to enshrine the icon of the king. The king is not subject to his own laws but is free to do whatever he wants. The king is the supreme ruler and authority. The king is not limited by anything or anyone. The king is not
subject to anything higher than himself, and very often, the ends may justify the means. The Christian God, conceived as the king of creation, is also imaged as having complete control over his creation. A chief executive officer of a corporation resembles this kingly image. A CEO is beholden to no one else, except to shareholders, but even they have no legislative power over the CEO’s actions. The CEO may do as he or she sees fit and is subject to no constitutional or ethical limitations to his behavior. Although a CEO can be prosecuted because he or she is subject to the laws of the country in which the business operates, but there is no ethical code of conduct that would constrain the decision-making and behavior of the CEO within the company. The only real constraints upon business originate outside of the company. Companies function independently because they are privately owned and managed. However, they nonetheless have impacts on the environment, some of which is commonly owned or owned by other private entities. Hence some entity must constrain a business from polluting the air, water, and land that belong to others. The consequences of businesses can affect many who do not benefit from the business. So the image of a king breaks down, since a company is not sovereign outside of itself. But within itself it does have a degree of sovereignty. In the US, the Republican Party is closely allied with free enterprise, and rather many Christians are Republicans. I suspect these two facts are connected. I would suggest that the reason for this is that both share the common image of divine sovereignty as a king.

Another, equally valid, way of viewing divine sovereignty can be found in Catholic publications. Here, divine sovereignty is not so much identified with laws as with a plan. God invites humans to share in the carrying out of this plan. It is divine sovereignty that is evidenced not only in the plan but also in the fact that humans are given the “dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of his plan.”5 Humans are entrusted with the responsibility of being stewards of the earth. Hence, in this perspective on sovereignty, human beings are colleagues of the divine plan, God’s fellow workers.

**Science as a Collegial Enterprise**

The profession of a scientist, in contrast to that of an entrepreneur, is regulated by internal ethical principles of conduct. Integrity is a practical necessity for a scientist. Every researcher wants results that promote the field, further knowledge, and attract grant money. Each experiment and all findings pose that possibility, but they also pose the risk of failure. A scientist’s integrity means she must let the chips fall as they may. The ends of success can never justify the fudging of experiments. No matter what is at stake, a Nobel Prize, a promotion, or a salary raise, the ends of knowledge never justify corrupting the means to knowledge. And scientists do not take their integrity lightly. Since other researchers review results and methods, the scientific process is self-correcting; distortions and corruptions tend to be exposed. This is the basis of collegiality in science. Science is a shared skill that belongs to no one in particular. It
belongs to the species, and is a way in which we communally pursue truth. Science is a community that unites people all over the world. Although there is competition to be the first in discovery there is incredible sharing of information and generosity. Anyone who knows this about science would never suspect that a grand conspiracy could ever be pulled off. Ethical principles forbid it; collegiality makes it virtually impossible.

So science, in practical reality, works only as a collegiate enterprise. Climatology is no exception. But the anti-scientific opposition, which in the US is made up mostly of Republican free-market Christians, is imbued with the image of the divine king. This makes the anti-scientific opponents think in a characteristically hierarchical fashion. Climate skeptics project this image on scientists, ascribing a sort of royal willfulness to them, which would make research conspiracies seem only natural.

**Democrats as Collegial**

Democrats generally are in favor of programs of social welfare that benefit the poor and helpless. This does not have to be motivated by pity and sympathy but may well be motivated by the desire to take responsibility for the poor and weak seriously. It does not take much insight to realize that capitalism depends on there being poor and unemployed. They can be the considered the collateral damage of capitalism. Caring for the poor and helpless may be a form of collegiality because it also doesn’t take much insight to realize that anyone could be the poor and the weak. There but for the grace of God go I. In his theory of justice, John Rawls articulates this more precisely.6 Behind the veil of ignorance we would not know whether we would be born into poverty or wealth, able-bodied or disabled, healthy or sick. Such a position would be the true egalitarian position from which to decide how to distribute the benefits and burdens of society because from that perspective I would want the weak and the poor to be taken care of in case I would find myself among them. Analogous to the collegiality of the divine plan the democrat sees herself as participating in the realization of a fair society. So behind the democrat is the vision of divine sovereignty as collegial. Human beings are caretakers not only of the earth but also of society.

**Our Common Institutions**

With this latest recession and economic downturn it became apparent that private companies are anything but private. This is not a statement about socialism. But it is a statement about the fact that business corporations (joint stock companies) are owned by shareholders and these shareholders often have their retirement funds invested there. The world is now so interconnected that when a large company flounders it affects people everywhere. Not only are businesses affecting the natural world but they are also affecting the social world. They are not isolated entities. At the same time, and especially in the United States, corporations may often do things that if an individual did would land them in prison. There are many people who became sick and died after
inhaling what came out of the World Trade Center Buildings when they came down. But the board members of the corporation that built the WTC did not go to prison. As anthropogenic climate change illustrates, entrepreneurs may use their companies for their own selfish and narrowly defined ends without consideration for the effects of their decisions on others. Behind this corporate attitude is the image of divine sovereignty as a king. And such an image can play a role even unconsciously. It is an ideal of absolute freedom from accountability. This ideal is not only impossible to attain, but it is not even desirable if one wants an optimally happy human life.

A Catholic Perspective on Global Climate Change

In “Global Climate Change: A plea for dialogue, prudence, and the common good, “ the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states that the earth’s atmosphere is a common good. Accordingly Roman Catholics have a responsibility to take care of it because it affects all human beings, especially the poor and the helpless. The Bishops call for responsibility by the ones who have perpetrated the greatest share of global warming, and they call on those endowed with the greatest blessings to take the lead in developing a “successful strategy that will reflect the participation and concerns of those most affected and least able to bear the burdens” of global warming.7 The Bishops believe that the United States and other industrialized nations must take that responsibility. From those who have received much, much is expected.

Prudence dictates that we act now to ensure that a disaster does not occur. Even if global warming were not caused by human factors, its consequences might still be catastrophic. Prudence dictates that we address the situation before it is too late. Such prudence is no different than the kind of prudence one exercises in taking out health insurance. Prudence or risk management requires precautions. Behind the Catholic Bishops’ response is the image of collegiality and responsibility. The Catholic Bishops see the earth as a gift from God that requires our participatory responsibility to care for it and the people in it.

Divine Sovereignty as the Image of the King Refuted

Of course the image of Christ as a king can be found in the New Testament. But it is certainly not the dominant image there. The Philippians hymn reads, “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”8 Here is an egalitarian image of Jesus because he gives up his status as God to take on the form of a human being. Nowhere in his life story do we see him behaving like an earthly king; in fact he denies that his kingdom is here on earth. And we don’t see him behaving like a king justifies unethical means to achieve his ends.
Instead we see a Jesus who submits to human laws and societal proceedings when taken before Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the Sanhedrin. We witness his acceptance of death as a punishment for blasphemy even though he knows it is unjust. And yet paradoxically, this acceptance is not a sign of weakness but rather of strength. Jesus has integrity in all he does. He cares about the effects he has on others. He takes responsibility for healing people and forgiving them even when he is not the cause of their suffering. He sees himself as participating with God in the salvation of people. He calls disciples and bestows his powers on them. He is the icon of divine sovereignty as collegial.

World Religions and Sovereignty Icons

Every major religion maintains the importance of dying to one’s false or ego self. Jesus’ death was the archetype of such dying. And although there are many articles of faith that differ among the world religions, no real Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Native American, or Taoist would deny the importance of dethroning the ego, the selfish, self-centered person we believe ourselves to be. The image of the self as a king must be disposed of. The existential reality of that is the same Jesus experienced in giving up his equality with God. He and we become equal to all other human beings. Nonwestern religions go even further in dethroning the king, asserting one must view oneself as equal to and one with all living beings. For Christians that is the kingdom of God on earth, because it is no longer the king’s will that reigns supreme but the will of God. God’s will, not his laws, establishes his kingdom. That will is experienced as divine guidance that one receives in prayer. God guides his people in their inner experience. Like the world religions, the movement is toward interiority and the more interior one becomes the more one realizes existentially that one is no greater than any other living being and one becomes the servant of all and develops compassion for all living beings. And it is out of this deep and intimate connection with God that human beings become partners with God in his providential plan for the salvation of people and his creation.

Solidarity with the Poor and the Weak

If the United States and other rich nations are to take responsibility for the dangerous reality of global warming, and if they are to take responsibility for the weak and the poor, then they must do so not as imperialists, but as colleagues. We must remember that behind the veil of ignorance we would want to care for the poor, the weak, and those most affected by global warming because it could just as easily be us. We cannot afford to demonize other countries, but we must view them as human just like us. We must look at our commonalities rather than focus on the differences. We must see the world through their eyes as though we were in their position, because we are no different. We are human, they are human, and we are all affected by the specter of global warming. The earth and its atmosphere is a common good. We cannot blame
the poor and the weak for their predicament because it is the strong and developed nations who have either created this danger or are blessed in order to solve the danger. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. And we might add that the tough are also the ones with integrity who have the courage to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions or responsibility for those who cannot help themselves.

Conclusion

To this day, especially in the United States, climate change research is the target of unjustifiable attacks. Climatologists are demonized, or accused of having ulterior motives, or pursuing material gain. There is a ring of paranoia to such polemics. Distrust and fear-mongering are rampant.

Non-specialists are at risk to be manipulated by such opposition to science. Yet this opposition is not just informed by greed or ignorance, but also by deep-seated icons of ultimate reality and meaning. These are the hidden images that serve as the navigational compass of life. They orient people so that they can find their way through complex realities. The image of the king is a powerful icon that motivates many people, especially US Christians, and helps them to manage complex issues. But the image of collegiality is also a powerful emblem, and it enjoys the advantage of allowing US Christians to come to terms with the scientific research on the emerging reality of climate change without having to abandon their religious identities. The image of collegiality is central to the figure of Jesus in the New Testament, and it has evident secular applications. In the end, societies driven by the image of kings breed conflict, egotism, and strife. Such societies are bound to fail. But societies informed by collegiality are far better equipped for the very cooperation and coordination that planetary mitigation of climate change requires. Collegial societies have the best odds to make it. Curiously, they also have the moral authority, and integrity, on their side.

1 In the Roman Catholic Church and in some Protestant churches, the “Feast of Christ the King” is celebrated on the fifth Sunday before Christmas, usually in late November. (M.S.)

2 Pope Pius XI in 1925 in his Encyclical Quas Primas promulgated this day in response to the anticlericalism that was brought upon society by the dictators of Europe at the time. Pope Pius was clear on the distinction: dictators reign over people by means of violence; Christ reigns in the hearts and wills of people because he redeems them. People consent to his kingdom by means of faith and repentance.

3 Collegiality is the Roman Catholic doctrine that bishops collectively share power. (M.S.)


8 Philippians 2:3-5 (New American Bible translation).