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STEWARDSHIP OR DOMINION? AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN EVANGELICAL OKLAHOMA

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

Conservative evangelical Christians have been labeled by liberal supporters of climate change research as "climate change deniers." However, conservative evangelical Christians do not deny climate change so much as integrate it into their existing worldview, which is predicated on the Bible as the inerrant word of God. This thesis discusses the different spatial and temporal scales of this worldview and shows how Christians actively engage key passages from the Bible to make sense of new information regarding climate change. It also demonstrates that these interpretations are not isolated; rather, Christians work together and support each other in arriving at Biblical truths through group fellowship opportunities and worship services. In doing so, this thesis shows that debates over "denial" preempt and destroy any opportunity to discuss ways to combat detrimental change with conservative evangelical Christians.

Stewardship or Dominion? An Ethnography of Climate Change in Oklahoma

I'm late. Like fifteen minutes late. I am dreading walking in late so much that I'm even considering turning around and going home. I unbuckle my seatbelt and hesitate. I had driven for nearly an hour, missed my exit, and made at least one wrong turn on the way here. Getting lost had cost me valuable time: the pastor's sermon was about to start, if it had not started already. What should I do? What would my friend Arian do? She would walk in, perhaps nervously, but she would definitely do it. I resolve to do what she would do. So why am I still sitting in my car? Is it raining? I crack open my car door and stick my hand out, nervously testing the air for falling moisture. I can only feel the dampness of my own palm against the breeze. A glance at my iPhone, displaying an unwavering 9:46 am, forces me out of my car with a jump. Sixteen minutes late.

As I set off towards the church at the far end of the parking lot, a sea foam green minivan pulls into the spot next to mine, and a family with a brood of fluffy-headed blond children aged four to eight tumble out. Girls in fuchsia satin and boys in pressed green slacks take off at a run towards an awning behind me. Their mother follows them repeating, "No running, no running" without conviction. *I'll just follow them in*, I say to myself, *and nobody will notice me*.

I don't realize how wrong I am until I'm halfway through what turns out to be the entrance to the day care wing. The children I just followed turn to gape at me just as everyone within a twelve foot radius of the swinging door notices me: childless, frizzy haired, and apparently dressed for a funeral. As the door clicks shut, their faces change

from surprise and annoyance to dimple-faced eagerness: I'm a stranger, I am lost, and I am in their church. The youngest child reaches for my hand with delicate fingers at the same exact time that her mom exclaims, "Oh honey, are you lost?" and a receptionist stands up behind her desk so fast her chair grates, while a grandfather in a tweed jacket asks, "Well, hello, new here?" and a uniformed guard with incredibly white teeth offers to walk me to the Worship Room. There's a brief conference over who should walk with me; the guard draws the honor. "Right this way," she says and strides off down a brightly lit hall. "And how are you today? I am so glad that you made it today," she laughs, but I don't recognize her face. As I do my best to power walk along behind her, we pass two life-sized portraits of a dark-haired man and woman in flowing robes and a room with a map of the Sinai peninsula on the wall. Wondering if the murals might be depicting the story of Moses, I immediately begin looking for my namesake, his tambourine-playing sister, above the screaming children. I tell myself that being able to recognize a Biblical narrative from pictures alone makes me a little less lost than they think I am.

As we follow the corridor, the murals give way to ordinary white walls, and we pass a room where a woman is handing out snacks. The smell of old apple juice and stale animal crackers wafts out. The smell, unexpected, takes me back to another weekend morning, twenty years ago and 1,318 miles away. Yet another damp day of old animal crackers and apple juice and heavy prayer books. Our teachers, perhaps unwisely, had lined our halls not with stories of Biblical miracles, but with the reminders of 5,000 years of Jewish persecution: persecution by our owners in Egypt, persecution by the Romans, persecution by the Greeks, persecution by the

Persians, persecution by the Christians during the Crusades, by the Catholics during the Inquisition, by the Russians and Ukrainians during the pogroms, and by pretty much all of Europe during the Holocaust. Peeling bits of cracker meal off the roof of my mouth with my tongue, I stared at one particularly exquisite portrait, cast in bronze, of a Jew in a loincloth being hung from his thumbs while a man with a Cardinal's robe smiled on. I wondered for the first time if God really did exist, and if he did, where He was when We needed him the most. *I don't think He exists*, my mom told me when I asked her later that day. That was the beginning and the end of my personal experience with religious faith.

Two stooped men in navy blazers yank open the doors to the central hall and pull me back to the present. To my left are the main doors and to my right are coffee machines on rolling carts and folding tables of empty cups—something I had never seen before, probably because I always come too early. Ahead of me, unavoidable now, are the wooden doors to the Worship Room. One of the stooped men hastens to get the door for me, the heels of his loafers scraping the carpet. "I'll hold the door open for you if you promise to go in," he smiles. "Okay, thanks," I squeak, and walk in.

The Worship Room is massive— of course, that's to be expected. But what's not expected is the soft brilliance of LED lights on the walls, the vibration of a thousand voices united in song, or the way it all sweeps around and through you when you haven't mentally prepared yourself for it like you do when you get here on time. Momentarily overwhelmed by the lights, the music, and the lingering stink of my own atheism, I start walking forward before I even know where I'm going—there are no seats. I turn back towards the door. A man by the door notices my retreat and steps up

to place a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. "Well, hello—are you lost or just looking for somewhere to sit for this morning?" "Uh," I wheeze, and he is already easing me down the main aisle, whispering, "Well, you can just sit by this lady right here, see her here on your left? Her name's Catherine, and she's a friend of mine. We leave that seat open—" *for people like you*, he maybe wants to say, but Catherine has somehow sensed us coming and has already begun moving her purse from the pew with her left hand and replacing the man's hand on my shoulder with her right. The big man has returned to his post by the door by the time I've placed my bag on the floor next to Catherine's purse. I glance at my phone and see that only a few minutes have elapsed since I walked into the daycare by mistake. I remember Margret laughing during our last interview. "You can't get away with that here," she warned me about sitting alone every week to observe. "People won't want to miss out on an opportunity to share with you. People will want to take you in."

Take me in, I repeated to myself. How did I of all people come to be taken in at an evangelical church in the suburbs of Oklahoma City?

After years of witnessing the effects of warming water temperatures and ocean acidification on coral reefs as a scuba instructor, I had come to Oklahoma explore what seemed to be a straightforward question: Why do evangelical Christians deny climate change?

I had started this project with what I thought was a simple definition of climate change, which refers to significant changes in the Earth's climate (general weather

patterns) lasting for an extended period of time as a result of the warming of the planet by 1.5 degrees Celsius. [1] It is generally thought that these changes are due to an increased production in greenhouse gases since 1880.[2] In addition to ocean acidification and resultant coral bleaching,[3] studies suggest that global climate change has caused and will lead to further rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and storms across the planet.[4] Although climate change scientists have reached a consensus about the definition and probable catastrophic results of climate change, skepticism regarding climate change is still prevalent, particularly in the United States and especially in the southern half of the country. [5] Prominent polls suggest that that skepticism regarding climate change science is high among Christians in the United States, particularly among some denominations of evangelical Christians concentrated in the South. [6] Among those denominations, Southern Baptists are the most likely to "deny" climate change altogether. [7]

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[1] US EPA, OAR 2016 Climate Change: Basic Information. Overviews and Factsheets. /climatechange/climate-change-basic-information, accessed April 27, 2017.
[2] Stockholm, J.P. 2013 It's Still Our Fault. The Economist. http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2013/09/ipcc-climate-change-report, accessed April 16, 2017.
[3] Cave, Damien, and Justin Gillis 2017. Large Sections of Australia's Great Reef Are Now Dead, Scientists Find. The New York Times, March 15. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/science/great-barrier-reef-coral-climate-change-dieoff.html, accessed March 15, 2017.
[4] European Commission, NASA
[5] See the following studies: Marlon, et al 2016; Stokes et al 2015
[6] Leiserowitz, Anthony, Edward Maibach, Connie Roser-Renouf, Geoff Feinberg, and Rosenthal 2015. Climate Change in the American Christian Mind. New Haven ,CT: Yale University and George Mason University. http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-in-the-american-christian-mind/, accessed February 24, 2017.
[7] Peach, Sara 2012. Baptists and Climate Change. Yale Climate Connections. http://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2012/03/baptists-and-climate-change/, accessed February 15, 2017.

Soon after I started fieldwork, however, I realized that my initial question, "Why do evangelical Christians deny climate change?" was useless, and perhaps even a little absurd. That assumptions of denial are at the center of the climate change debate reflect a conundrum within the discipline of anthropology, the sciences more broadly, and our society in general.

The Enlightenment represented a break in the way European intellectuals perceived of time. The history of the Earth, life and nature was given over to the natural sciences, while historians and social scientists were tasked with study the history of modern humans. The perception of geological time as a slow, immense backdrop against which the drama of human history unfolded has more or less persisted until the present day. Climate change shows us the folly of such an approach to the planet: It represents a collision of temporal scales long held separate and intact by secularism. The complexities of this collision have caused some scientists to adopt the term *Anthropocene,* to demonstrate the new geological force that is humankind.[8]

[8] Anthropologists Alf Hornborg and Andreas Malm (2014) note that the term "Anthropocene," in placing the burden of climate change on the species as a whole, obscures the historical origins of the drivers of climate change in Western capitalist investment and modern industrialism. In doing so, the global discourse on climate change masks the ways that capitalism and modern industrialism have caused the uneven distributions of wealth and power that lead to the unequal experiences of impacts, agency and vulnerability in regard to the effects of climate change. Haraway (2015) notes that such discourse normalizes capitalist development, it absolving those who benefit from capitalist and industrial systems from taking any meaningful action that cannot be taken by the species as a whole. The normalization of capitalism echoes colonialist notions of technocratic progress and civilization that have haunted the field since its inception and contributes to the silencing of those most vulnerable to effects of climate change. In doing so, it contributes to the erasure of what Chakrabarty (2009) terms different "registers of experience," particularly of those outside the global discourse on climate change.

In addition, the Enlightenment also marked a break in the way that European intellectuals regard religious, people, particularly Christians, who do not share their worldview. Christians who express skepticism about the products of modern industrialism, such as climate change, are and always have been vilified. This is reflected in anthropology's, and the social sciences more broadly, neglect of this aspect of the debate.

Anthropologists of religion neglected Christianity and especially evangelical Christianity until about ten years ago. According to Joel Robbins (2014), this is due to two main factors: first, anthropologists were extremely reluctant to empathize with Christian outlooks regarded as conflicting with science itself. The second factor, subsumed in the first, is that experiences of temporal rupture claimed by Christians conflicted with the field's interests in continuity and long-term change.

Until recently, anthropology of climate change has been shaped by the anthropocentric discourse surrounding impacts and outcomes of global changes rather than the reception of the concept of climate change. This is due to the discourse surrounding climate change's origin in modern industrialism. The discourse around climate change, like that around science since the Enlightenment, almost always frames the debate in terms that leave out other ways of knowing, including those of indigenous peoples. This in turn produces what Peter Rudiak-Gould calls the "particular blind spot" of anthropology of climate change: that of climate change reception, or "the cultural and ideological reasons why locals choose to trust or distrust the scientific discourse of global warming about which they have heard." [9]

[9] Rudiak-Gould 2011, 1

Recently, several scholars of Native North America have called on all scientists and not just anthropologists to take seriously the worldviews other than the one in which the concept of climate change originated, leaving behind the terms of the debate on climate change. This project answers their call by taking seriously the worldview of conservative evangelical Christians. In bridging these two fields, I turn away from previous approaches to climate change, to show how information is contextualized within the lived experiences of fundamentalist evangelical Christians. In doing so, I uncover particular instances where both secular modernists and evangelical Christians share some of the same concerns about their local environments and the planet which we all share.

In writing about the challenges of conceptualizing and exploring the human experience of climate change, political ecologist Susan Crate advocates for a renewal of the ethnographic project.[10] Ethnography capitalizes on the ethnographer's situation within what Anna Tsing calls a "zone of awkward engagement," where seemingly obvious terms take on different meanings for different people even as they attempt to converse with one another.[11] In the following ethnography, I turn away from previous approaches to climate change, instead utilizing developments in the anthropology of Christianity to show how climate change is contextualized within the lived experiences of fundamentalist evangelical Christians and their faith. In doing so, I move away from divisive structures of belief and denial that render Americans as separate and

[10] Crate 2011, 184-6
[11] Tsing, Anna 2014 Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection. Princeton: Princeton University Press, x-xi

unknowable to each other and offer a way in which we can approach the challenges of a changing planet together.

The Southern Baptist Convention and Evangelicalism

Pastor is thanking the choir and music director Keith. Kneeling beside the podium, he leans his elbow on his bent knee and asks us all to pray with him. Everyone else lowers their heads to concentrate on Pastor's words. Suddenly head and shoulders above the crowd, I am able to take in the entire church and congregation for the first time that day.

From the outside, the church appears to hold thousands of people: its three-story brick facade towers over the smaller, white-washed Mormon church across the street and the neat rows of small townhouses next door. A sign facing the street lets passers-by know this is the Rocky Creek Baptist Church.[12] Though the church may seem overwhelmingly large to an outsider, its members are quick to point out that it is not "one of those megachurches" for several reasons: First, this church was established in the 1890s, while the current megachurch movement developed after World War II.[13] This church is too old to be a megachurch. In addition, Brian, the minister of education and one of my key informants, reminds me that megachurches are generally defined as having 2,000 weekly attendants.[14]

"I counted about 1,100 at our last service," Brian says proudly.

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[12] Name has been changed as per members' request.
[13] Eagle, David E. 2015 Historicizing the Megachurch. Journal of Social History 48: 589–604.
[14] This statistic is backed by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research: The Definition of a Megachurch from Hartford Institute for Religion Research http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html

Finally, Rocky Creek's leadership rejects the megachurch label on practical and theological grounds: where megachurches seek to grow into the tens of thousands, Rocky Creek maintains its size maintained through constant church planting, a process by which the church establishes a ministry in a nearby community and asks members—sometimes several hundred of them—to switch their membership to the new church in order to help it grow. Rocky Creek's leaders argue that it is through church planting and not through church growth that they will be able to bring more people to Christ.[15] Therefore, though the congregation is large, Rocky Creek's pastor and leadership do not consider it a megachurch. Most of the church's massive space is given over to classrooms and offices for its staff, which take direction from the Pastor. [16]

"We are here to support Pastor in getting his message out," Margret told me at our first meeting. "That's our job." She went on to explain that such a hierarchical approach is common among Southern Baptist Convention churches.

The Southern Baptist Convention incorporated in the 1840s following a disagreement with northern Baptist churches over the appointment of slave owners as missionaries to foreign countries.[17] The Convention is a fellowship consisting of 46,500 full churches and about 4,500 missions at any given time. While it does not have a

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[15] Brian Frank, private communication, February 2017

[16] Historian David Eagle (2015) writes that both outsiders and leaders of the megachurch movement treat it as an entirely new development within Protestant history. Eagle and others (Loveland and Wheeler 2004) show that Protestants have been building large, multifunctional churches for congregations numbering in the thousands since the 1600s. In recent years, several prominent megachurches, including Saddleback, have encountered financial difficulties as a result of unchecked growth and strain on pastors (Suttle 2011).

[17] Baker, Robert A. 1979 Southern Baptist Beginnings. Baptist History and Heritage Society.http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/southernbaptistbeginnings.html, accessed May 1, 2017.

strict hierarchy, it does have a governing body made up of representatives from each of its member churches that passes resolutions by which member churches are expected to abide.[18] These resolutions refer to anything from the ability of women to serve in the ministry to the official position of the Southern Baptist Convention regarding climate change policies. The flexibility of the Convention allows congregations the freedom to choose their own pastor through a democratic process. The congregation of Rocky Creek chose Pastor from among several other applicants following a three-year search for the perfect pastor to fit into their community. Several years later, it is clear that Pastor has established a close relationship with his church members.

As Pastor stands up from his prayer, he asks us, "Do you know I love you, church?" The church cheers in approval. His demeanor suddenly turns stern. He warns us that he is angry, "I am going to unload on you today!" Everyone around me laughs and the room seems to lean forward, their Bibles open on their laps. However, instead of starting with the pre-arranged passage from Corinthians, he asks everyone to turn briefly to the Book of James. One thousand people rush to join him, the turning of their pages sounding like the beating of so many small white wings. The source of Pastor's anger that morning is soon evident as he reads aloud and explains the words of Paul. Standing before the podium, he reads: "'When I came to you, brothers, I did not come to you proclaiming the testimony of God with lofty speeches of wisdom.'" Pastor looks up to make sure we are following along. "In other words, he says, I didn't come to

[18] Southern Baptist Convention. Welcome to the Southern Baptist Convention N.d. http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist, accessed April 27, 2017.

promote myself. 'I didn't come to put on display my intellect. For I have decided to know nothing among you except'—What?" He queries us. To the left of me, Catherine's fingertip trips down the page in search of the answer. Before she can find it, Pastor clarifies: "Except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.'" Closing his Bible temporarily, Pastor looks down at us. "Paul was a scholar. And he could have come to them with eloquence of speech and he could have sought to speak over their heads in order to promote his intellectualism. Paul is not condemning—or Paul is not promoting anti-intellectualism. What he is saying is that should not be our purpose."

The source of Pastor's anger –the charge that religious belief is incompatible with intellectual rigor—is a common theme throughout my research. Whether over coffee and doughnuts after church one morning ("We may look like rednecks, but we actually read a lot") or during our interviews ("There are such things as devout Christian scientists, you know"), Pastor and members of the church would remind me in both subtle and overt ways that intellectualism was not always viewed as incompatible with Christianity, and implied that it was my fault, as a secularist liberal, that such explanations were necessary. Their attitudes reflect a long term- association between their awareness of the long-standing secularist tradition of caricaturing fundamentalist Christians, most notably from the South and rural areas, as willfully ignorant or intellectually inferior.

Anthropologist Fenella Cannell locates the dichotomization between secularity and Christianity within the developing association between capitalism, industrialization,

and modernity. [19] While religion is often associated with the past, the future is construed as secular, scientific and modern. By the 1800s, secularization had become firmly entrenched in the ideology of modernity, with Christians (and other religious people more broadly) criticized as anti-modern or worse. These critiques crystallized in 1925 with the state victory during the case of The State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes, better known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. During and after the trial, modernist commentators and journalists, most notably the journalist H.L. Mencken, lampooned not only fundamentalist beliefs, but also fundamentalist communities' traditionalism and cultural isolation. Mencken wrote that Southern rural preaching was nothing more than "degraded nonsense" "being rammed and hammered into yokel skulls" and that "so-called religious organizations" reflect a "congenital hatred of knowledge," claiming that religious fundamentalism was only embraced by the intellectually inferior.[20] Fundamentalist commentators who ignored the trial were framed as withdrawing from American public discourse altogether. In the decades since the trial, fundamentalist Christian Americans, Americans from the South and rural Americans have been portrayed as ignorant in popular media.[21] In recent conversations surrounding climate change, Christians are almost always described as "denying" or "rejecting" evidence while being ignorant of their actions and motivations.[22] As individuals who identify as rural Southern Baptists, it is hardly surprising that Pastor and his congregants would

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[19] Cannell, Fenella 2010. The Anthropology of Secularism. Annual Review of Anthropology 39: 85–100.
[20] Mencken, H. L. Coverage of The Scopes Trial. https://archive.org/stream/CoverageOfTheScopesTrialByH.l.Mencken/ScopesTrialMencken.txt, accessed April 10, 2017.
[21] See, for example, Kerr 2003 and Cox 2011
[22] Armitage 2005 and Dykstra 2017

react defensively to a liberal discourse that inevitably portrays them as ignorant or backwards by virtue of their disagreement with scientists.

However, just as I mentally concede this historical point to the pastor, he says something else which makes me realize that he is not only addressing non-Christians, but also other Christians:

"But there are false teachers in our day who refer to themselves as 'progressives.' Pastor pauses, frowns and looks around room. "That's a catchword. You need to pay attention to it. They refer to themselves as progressive in that they do not believe in the inerrancy of the Word of God."[23] Pastor is not referring to liberal atheists or even Charismatic Christians at this point; he is referring to progressive evangelical Christians.

The term "evangelical" (derived from the Greek word for "the good news") arose in response to the modernist critiques of the 1920s and 1930s. The term is often used in conjunction with "Pentecostalism;" however, the two are completely separate movements.[24] Fighting the portrayal of fundamentalist Christians as isolationists, evangelicals uphold the importance of public and political engagement alongside

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[23] Gideon, Blake, dir. 2017 Stirred Up: Exposing False Teachers Part 1. Edmond, Oklahoma.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PE245dUvks&list=PLXqSm6W3Mqs9Tluo1VLMXKiIFFRchGNib&index=5, accessed April 30, 2017.

[24] Charismatic Christianity, of which Pentecostalism is one manifestation, formed in the 19th century in response to concerns that mainline Protestant denominations were too formal and that pastors focused on the needs of the wealthier classes. In stark contrast to mainline Protestant denominations and evangelicals, who emerged later, Charismatic Christians' worldview is characterized by the lived experience of miracles, prophecies and faith healing (the ability to heal or restore someone through the Holy Spirit). Some groups also experience glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, and being physically overcome, or slain, by the Holy Spirit. While Charismatic Christians and Pentecostals can be evangelical in their outlook, many other Christians have renounced such practices.

fundamentalist concepts of Biblical inerrancy (the belief that the Bible is the literal word of God), the importance of conversion and a personal relationship with God. However, within the evangelical movement, there is much debate over the meaning and relative order of importance of these terms. While an increasing number of progressive evangelical leaders support climate change research and other causes traditionally associated with political and theological liberalism,[25] Pastor aligns himself and his congregation with the positions of Southern Baptist Convention and other conservative evangelical Christians. In doing so, he positions them in opposition to progressive evangelicalism.

Picking up his Bible, Pastor asks us to join hands in prayer. Having always found a spot in the back from which to observe this part of the service, I find myself unsure of what to do next. Fortunately, Catherine has already seized my left hand—pen, notebook and all—and has clamped her chin to her chest in prayer. Hearing shuffling to my right, I look over, then down, to see a small, white haired woman reaching for my other hand across the aisle. Her hand is buttery and has the faint, not unpleasant odor of vanilla moisturizer. She squeezes my hand, surprisingly sharply, and I look into her deep blue eyes. "It's going to be okay," she says sympathetically. "I hope so," I told her. She squeezes my hand again before lowering her head in prayer. Not one to pray, I look up and around the room. I can see Brian, the minister of education, greeting people in the front rows. Keith, the worship arts minister, has taken

[25] Moyers on America . Is God Green? Religion and the Environment | PBS 2006 http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/green/environment.html, accessed February 13, 2017.

over the podium from Pastor. I can see Margret, the church's communication expert, and her husband exit through a rear door to prepare for our Bible study group. Following right behind them is the leader of my Wednesday study group, Tony, with his wife and their adult children.

Despite the difficulties anthropologists have experienced in delimiting Christianity[26] and religion more generally,[27] I had found a discrete, easily identifiable community of Christians within which to conduct fieldwork. Over the course of two and a half months, I regularly attended Sunday sermons, conducted participant observation of Sunday Bible study classes, Wednesday Bible study classes, and Monday communications team meetings. In addition, I conducted informal interviews and semi-structured formal interviews with 10 congregants who also held leadership roles within the church. All church members were united in their opposition—sometimes heated, sometimes ambivalent—to experiences of Christianity outside the Southern Baptist Convention. All expressed varying degrees of skepticism and acceptance regarding climate change science.

The Function of Faith

My first contact at the church was Brian, though the e-mail I sent had initially gone to Margret, the communications specialist. I can still remember the excitement

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[26] Robbins 2007;
Lampe, Frederick. 2010 The Anthropology of Christianity: Context, Contestation, Rupture, and Continuity. Reviews in Anthropology 39: 66–88.
[27] Bielo, James S. 2015. Anthropology of Religion: The Basics. London: Routledge.

when, sitting in a hot basement office reserved for grad students, I got a call from an unknown 405 number. Brian had written to me earlier that day, saying that Margret had forwarded him my e-mail about a potential research project and that he would like to talk to me on the phone. He had signed off, "Joy and Peace, Brian." My phone had barely begun to ring when I scooped it off the desk and sprinted up the stairs and out into the courtyard to get a clear phone signal. Shivering in the cold sunlight of another Oklahoma winter day, I forced myself to breathe normally before answering the phone. "Hello?" I said, and then quickly followed with, "This is Miriam." We chatted about the church, the membership, and finally about my project. I don't remember the details of our discussion, but I do remember the deep, slow measure of Brian's invitation. "We would love to have you join us this week." "Really?" I asked before I could stop myself. "Yes, we have a communications team meeting with members of the leadership on Monday morning at 10, you should come and um," he paused, and I could hear papers shuffling, "participant observe the meeting. Yes. We would love to have you there." Not knowing what else to say, I thanked him. "You have a truly blessed day, now." Though I had yet to see his face, I thought I could feel the sincerity of his words through the phone.

Several weeks of team meetings, Bible study classes, and Sunday services later, I found myself finally sitting down to an interview with Brian for the first time. We had tried to make an appointment before, but Brian was as busy as my university professors and his meetings always seemed to run late. I had brought Brian the requisite number of consent forms—one copy for him, one for me—but he asked to photocopy the one that I planned to take home anyway.

After he left to make the copy, I took the opportunity to look around his office. The wall behind Brian's desk looked pleated, like the folds of a fan. Sunlight slanted in from the wall panels facing the door. While most of the books concern theology, evangelicalism, and church history, I noticed with some surprise that even works of fiction and texts from other religions filled some shelves like tangents in a conversation. I immediately chastised myself for expecting anything else. Later, Brian and I would bond over a shared love of all three Lord of the Rings books and an extreme dislike of the recent Hobbit movies, but I was still learning that Southern Baptists, like all people, defy my expectations every chance they get.

Looking more closely at the shelves, I could see that they are piled deep with books, sometimes two layers thick, and where he ran out of room Brian laid books sideways along the top of other volumes. In front of his books, Brian placed photos of what I could only assume are friends and family members, trophies, and small figurines—souvenirs from travels, perhaps, or from church events. Brian returned and settled down behind his desk, his pale gaze direct and clear. Where Brian's bookcases represented the rambling curiosity of his mind, his desk demonstrated the clarity of his mission: Along the edge closest to me, he had neat stacks of "tangibles"—stickers, inserts, buttons—from previous church campaigns. To his right were slips of paper, including his copies of the consent form for my project, which he shifted and slid around as we talked, first about the Clio Awards, then about successful marketing campaigns, before he abruptly turned the conversation to me. As he did so, he placed his hand on a large, leather-bound copy of the Bible. Like the Pastor's, it was edged in gold.

"Now, I ask everyone who walks into our church this. I assume you are a Christian. Can you tell me, what is your religious background?" I politely told him that I was not a Christian. His pale eyes seemed to get larger in his face.

"I'm Jewish," I explained. "And are you a," he paused and squinted at me, "are you a religious Jew?" I told him no, I identify as a secular Jew.

"Well—and I hope you don't mind me saying this—but I hope that you come to Christ during your time with us." I told him I did not mind, which was true, and asked him to describe his religious background. He told me that he had thought himself saved when he was a boy but came to realize as a young adult that he was not living a Biblical life. He made the decision to rededicate his life to God. "Well, I came to Christ when I was young… so I guess you, someone like you could call me a born-again, evangelical, Southern Baptist Christian," he said with a smile.

He tapped the cover of his Bible twice as if to draw my attention to it. I realized that his response was meant to convey not only his "religious background" as he called it but the way in which being an evangelical Christian shaped his personal and political convictions.

By the 1960s, the growing visibility of right wing evangelists on television and the radio as well as on the physical landscape served to unite American Christians into what anthropologist Susan Harding called "one morally outraged movement": born-again Christianity, which was not only moral, but social and political in nature. Just as my description of myself suggested my religious, political, and personal leanings, Brian had used one phrase to suggest not only his religious background but his political and personal views as well.

I wondered if Brian was rethinking his decision to invite me to his church. As if reading my mind, Brian said that he was happy to have an outsider in the church. I was surprised. "Really?" I asked. "Yes." He insisted that he wants atheists and lost people in the Sunday study groups. "Atheists and agnostics ask the good questions, the hard questions in the class, the questions that nobody else asks. Then we can find the answers together. The answers are right here." His left hand moved to his Bible, but his eyes stayed on me, thoughtful and opaque. "You know, scientists can be devout Christians. There are scientists who are actually devout Christians." "Isaac Newton," I offered helpfully. He smiled delightedly, and I felt hopeful that we had assuaged each other's doubts. He told me that Christians are not opposed to finding out the physical laws that God made for the world.

"However," the corners of his mouth turned down, "there's a difference between fact and theory and the 'preponderance' of evidence." I asked him for an example. "Well, I haven't studied all of the global warming literature, but it seems to me that global warming's argument are for man-made causes. But I would like some explanations." He pulls out different examples of arguments that seem to contradict each other. His hands are moving everywhere, touching first the papers in front of him, now brushing the cover of his Bible. One article he read stated that sea ice is melting, but another stated that it is getting thicker. "Which is it?" I couldn't argue with him—articles on climate change science can be confusing. I ask him what, out of everything he has read and heard, he believes. He leaned back in his chair, his smile wide. "I believe that the world today is like Corinth when Paul was there. You know, scientists

are asking all these detailed questions, and we don't have all the detailed answers—but we have the one big one," he said.

He put his hand on his Bible again. His eyes, open and clear again, never broke their hold on my gaze. "Does that make sense?" I told him that it made sense—but when I replayed the interview later I could tell from my tone that it did not make sense to me, not yet.[28] Sitting alone in my office with my headphones in the middle of the night, weeks later, I realized that Brian's words are best explained by Harding's concept of faith.

In *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist language and politics* (2000), Harding explains how the logic of fundamentalist faith rests on an apparent contradiction: belief in an omnipotent God and Biblical inerrancy in the face of apparent contradictions and anomalies within the text of the Bible itself. Whenever evangelical Baptists and other biblical literalists encounter an inconsistency within or between Biblical texts, they interpret it as evidence of God's omnipotence: only God knows why these anomalies exist. For example, the story of Jacob revolves around a character that lies to and steals from his own family members but is ultimately chosen by God to father a new nation. The fact that God favors Jacob in spite of his obvious flaws and crimes is seen as evidence of God's eminence: only God knows why God would favor a sinner like Jacob. Encounters with anomalies and contradictions like those found in the story of Jacob become sites for the production of faith through the recreation of this interpretive leap. When believers encounter information from nonbelievers that potentially contradicts Biblical truth, they engage in the same logical

[28] Brian Frank, interview with Miriam Laytner, March 2017.

interpretation, which ultimately provides them with the proof of Biblical infallibility.[29] For Brian, faith in Biblical inerrancy provides the logic by climate change science is evaluated. Where outsiders see indicators of climate change as contradicting Biblical faith, Brian and other Evangelical Christians absorb that potential contradiction as further proof of divine omnipotence. In other words, they do not deny or dismiss climate change science so much as interpret it according to the logic of world that is governed by Biblical inerrancy. However, their logic is not grounded in the concept of Biblical inerrancy alone. Through sermons and Bible study classes, evangelicals become familiar (some more than others, of course) with specific Biblical passages that evangelical Christians draw upon in forming their understandings of climate change science and determining how this information should affect their behavior.

At the time of my first interview with Brian, I didn't think to ask what parts of the Scripture helped Brian arrive at his conclusions about climate change science. It was only through subsequent conversations that I was able to build on my understanding of the fundamentalist function of faith to listen to my interviewees' speech for indicators of the specific passages that helped them interpret climate change science.

Stewardship and Dominion

[29] Harding, Susan Friend 2001. The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics. Reprint edition. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. (86)

I met Keith in the hallway outside his office, as if he were waiting for me. Walking past the desk of his secretary and a sign that read "Worship Arts," I was immediately greeted by rows of trumpets, guitars, banjos, and didgeridoos under smiling photographs of the many orchestras and choirs Keith has directed over the years. Keith likes to say that he has known since he was 15 that it was his calling to combine his passion for music with ministry. However, he is also quick to point out that he is passionate about a great many things; music and ministry, yes, but more so his daughters and granddaughters, whose portraits grace his desk.

Keith indicated that I should sit on a long, plush grey-green couch in his office, into which I promptly sank like a bowling ball on a waterbed. "I know, it's nice, right?" he said as I wiggled self-consciously to the end of the couch. Turning sideways on the cushion in what I hoped to be a professional and conversational pose, I realized that the wall behind me was dedicated to photographs and sketches of deer.

I asked him if he liked to hunt. "Yeah. But you know I grew up in a small town— and we didn't live in town, either, we lived out in the country. You know, I was a country boy. Still to this day I love to hunt and fish." Pointing to the wall behind me, he said, "I do that because people might take offense to me bringing deer heads in and hanging them on the walls." Pulling an armchair from its place by his desk, he nodded in my general direction. I weighed my response. While I personally had only bad experiences with hunting, I knew from previous research experience in eastern and central Oklahoma that recent periods of severe drought, attributed by some to climate change, had damaged the state's $6 million hunting industry.

Two years earlier, I worked for climate researchers based at the National Weather Center to interview resource and emergency managers across the region regarding local perceptions of drought and groundwater use.[30] Like the men and women I collaborated with and interviewed, I was trained to interpret local weather changes in terms of global climate change. [31] For example, soil conservation managers in the eastern Oklahoma told me that years of drought and sudden floods had forced rural landowners to spend thousands of dollars watering and seeding forested land leased to recreational hunters for much-needed income.[32] Despite landowners' best efforts, disease and thirst meant remaining deer lacked enough nutrients for proper antler production and the hunting industry suffered as a result.[33] Local managers feared that, given the increasing risk of drought and flood due to climate change, [34] the low numbers of deer, quail, and other species would become a new norm and that the region would not recover. Questions relating to drought, climate change, and the hunting industry were still foremost in my mind during my interview with Keith.

I realized Keith was waiting for a response. "I wouldn't be offended," I told him.

Settling into the armchair, Keith explained that he had been hunting on his family's property since he was almost the same age that his grandchildren are now. I

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[30] OU IRB #5626

[31] Southern Climate Impact Planning Program, "Climate Change in Oklahoma" 2014

[32] This is an observation that has been made elsewhere, see: Johnston 2014.

[33] Johnston 2014, Lett 2014, Behrens 2016

[34] McManus, Gary 2012. Mesonet | News | Drought Continues to Persist, Worsen in Oklahoma.https://www.mesonet.org/index.php/news/article/drought_continues_to_persist_worsen_in_oklahoma, accessed May 13, 2016.

asked him what he enjoys most about hunting. He glanced up at the deer over my head and to the ceiling. "You know, I just sit there for hours and just think and talk to God." I asked what he talked to God about.

> "You know, just about anything. Sometimes—I'm a songwriter so a lot of times I'll be sitting and even praying as I'm sitting and watching and some lyrics will come to my mind, and I will get out my phone and you know, very quietly type them into my phone and come back and work on them a little bit… A lot of times I'll be sitting and watching, and I'll open up the Bible on my phone and just read the Bible. It's just a good devotional time for me, you know?"

I liked Keith from the moment he sat next to me in our first team meeting. He gently tugged up at his grey dress slacks before he sat down and, crossing the right ankle of his scuffed cowboy boot onto on his left knee, smiled at the room like he was about to tell them a good joke. I realized that day that what I thought was the UV sheen on a new pair of glasses is actually a reflection of the joy he gets from talking to new people and sharing with them. He shared all of his papers and notes with me that first day, sliding them to a point on the conference table exactly halfway between us. Leaning over to look at a draft of a social media announcement about church-wide dinners, I quietly circled the word "spaghetti," which had been misspelled. Keith chuckled and drew a check mark next to my circle before announcing my find to the group: "Miriam wants you to know that you can't spell!" Now, when one of us notices a typo or a grammatical error in the text, we circle it and the other one nods conspiratorially before a game of silent pointing ("You do it." "No, you do it!") determines who will be the one to point out the mistake to the author. He is thoughtlessly generous and likes to have fun.

I asked him if he had seen any changes to these landscapes, which were so important to his personal history and as devotional spaces. I wanted to understand how a religious person like Keith contextualized changes that I knew about from my own conversations with residents of rural southeastern Oklahoma.

Keith seemed to greet the question with a resigned "Yeah." Then he quickly added,

> "It has to a degree. There's a lot more for instance, where my parents live—I hunt there some, there's been a lot of homes built all around us. Where we used to be just kind of out in the middle of nowhere, there have been a lot of homes built so therefore the deer have kind of been concentrated to a degree. A lot of the paths that they used to take are no longer there. So you don't see as many. There's another place out near Washington, Oklahoma, that I hunt that's a little more rustic, and I've, you know, especially the last few years with all the drought, you notice a lot of change. There's not as much as foliage, you know, and then—"

And here Keith held up a hand, then drew a quick half-circle to indicate a sudden change, "What was it? Four or five years ago, we had so much rain in the spring, and everything was just, just green and grown up in places. Before deer season opened, we had to go out with chainsaws and just clear our path to get to where we could hunt." Tilting his head up at his deer portraits, he mused, "So there's been change. I think the biggest change has been, though, construction of new homes and housing additions."

He crossed and re-crossed his legs. I asked him if he ever hunted with anyone. He smiled dreamily and said yes—that he hunted with his father. Keith is very close to both of his parents and visits them frequently. I asked if his father ever commented on drought-related changes around his property and he said that his father agreed—the main cause for change in rural Oklahoma had to be suburban expansion but that cycles

of drought and rain had come through and made the area more desiccated and then more lush, however briefly.

Dissatisfied with his answers but not wanting to be seen as pushy or rude, I stuttered, “Well I guess, um, what I was wondering is—people attribute these changes to climate change, basically.” He tilted his head, and I wondered if I had insulted him. “And I was wondering what you would say to people who say that,” I added hastily. Keith responded almost before I had finished.

“I don't disagree with that, I think that personally it's—“ he paused and sighed.

“I personally think it's more political than it is reality. I'm not saying that climate change is not reality, but I also believe as I study the Bible that this Earth is not going to keep spinning forever, that the day is going to come when it's going to be—” He looked at me and smiled ruefully. “And you know.” We both paused momentarily, and I thought sadly about the end of the world. Keith continued.

“Now, does that mean that I say, well I don't need to be concerned about ecology? Oh no, absolutely not. I need to take care of what God's given us to care for. But I'm not going to lose a lot of sleep over it…I believe that we need to take care and be good stewards of what we've received, and if we can find better ways to power this big world that we live in, great.” I was surprised to hear Keith bring up energy, given the deep connections between the oil industry and the state of Oklahoma.

“The Bible says that creation groans, and I think that's part of it too—very much—that the Earth itself is changing, you know. And then you put three hundred million people in one country—which is, by India's standards isn't that many people—but still with the amount of time and money that goes into, for instance, the oil

production you can see why it would cause that." Keith paused, and furrows appeared across his forehead and at the corners of his mouth. He sat up taller and folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not a scientist, you know. I've observed the land where I hang out, where I spend my leisure time, and I've seen some changes taking place. Even on my own parents' property, there is an oil well now that didn't use to be there that has produced very well, but we haven't noticed any changes in the ecology around it."[35]

Recognizing the defensiveness in Keith's posture and tone, I realized that I had accidentally keyed into the discourse of climate change that painted Keith and other Christians as ignorant of the import of their own experiences. Faith is achieved when new, potentially contradictory information and experiences are interpreted through inerrant Biblical text. In engaging the "stewards," Keith references the idea that Christians must maintain the planet. However, he then adds that he would not prioritize stewardship over providing power for people all over the world, a statement that references the concept of dominion. The two seemingly contradictory terms are mentioned throughout the Bible, but are found first in two neighboring passages in Genesis. The concept of stewardship is derived from Genesis 2: 8-15 which say that man must "dress", "keep", and "serve" the Garden into which we have been placed. However, in Genesis 1: 26-28, believers are told that they are given "dominion" over the Earth and that they must "subdue" and "rule" it. While the appearance of these two concepts may seem like a contradiction to an outsider, for those who believe in Biblical inerrancy the function of faith described above reconciles stewardship and dominion by keeping them in dialogue with each other. In his subtle engagement of these concepts

[35] Keith Haygood, interview with Miriam Laytner, March 2017

during our interview, Keith harmonized potentially contradicting information such as climate change data or personal experience into the preexisting Biblical balance between the two concepts. Where to outsiders it may seem that Keith is using the Bible to justify a political stance, Keith is, like the rest of us, looking for a way to balance a desire to use natural resources with a desire to protect, nurture, and conserve them. Although he locates his reasoning within specific passages of the Bible, he does not ignore or deny science. While my early conversations with Brian helped demonstrate the fundamentalist function of faith, further conversations with Keith showed the specific language in the Bible that help evangelical Christians interpret climate change science within their worldview. Both Brian and Keith demonstrate a willingness to talk about climate change and read and discuss the scientific literature. However, the onus is on advocates of climate change science to find the language to speak with them in ways that make sense to all of us.

The concept of dominion is further justified by Keith's assertion that the Earth will not "keep spinning forever," a reference to the Second Coming when the world will be reborn. Though I knew what Keith was referencing, it was not until several weeks later and my discussion with Margret that I fully understood time itself is viewed in the service of this event, collapsing both recent past events and near present events into the post-Biblical present.

The Evacuation of the Near Future

My stomach rumbled. Margret's chocolate bear claw sat almost directly in front of me, the cinnamon stripes tickling my nose. We had only been talking for twenty

minutes, but in those few minutes Margret glossed over her childhood, young adulthood, and concluded with the birth of her son during middle adulthood, and a few years later, finding Jesus. She then sat across from me with one eyebrow above the other, thumbing a double strand of rainbow glass beads around her neck and waiting. Unprepared for the speed with which Margret revealed her entire life to me, I nervously joked that my coffee needed to come soon or we would have the shortest interview ever. She laughed and leaned back in her chair. I glanced toward the baristas tapping away at their smartphones. It was lunchtime in a crowded Panera Bread outside Oklahoma City, and while Margret, a frequent customer, seemed to have gotten her order almost instantaneously, mine was nowhere to be seen.

I asked her what life was like on the small farm she had briefly mentioned. She explained that her father and mother, who still live on the same property in central Oklahoma, made sure their daughters always knew how to "rebuild engines, change the oil, run the tractor, harvest the food, work in the garden," and solve any other problems they encountered. She said that her parents encouraged her to use creative thinking to find solutions in her own way: "You know, a lot of engineers are problem solvers, but on the flip side, you can still be creative and be a problem solver, you're just a little bit more creative." She tilted her chin up and laughed, a move I would become familiar with in the coming weeks. "Might not do it like an engineer would, but—!" and she took a bite of her pastry.

After graduating college, she worked in a small architecture firm on the East Coast while her husband, who is and always has been a devout Christian, worked for a larger firm. She described her dissatisfaction with corporate life and it's inflexibility

when she wanted to take time to spend with her young son. It was around this time that Margret started attending church with her husband, but she explained to me that going to church did not make her a true Christian. It was not until two years later, on September 11, 2001, that she began to attend church in earnest. She explained,

> Before 9/11, I was listening to Dr. Laura. And you know, kind of listening to how people would solve life's problems. Kind of what her answers are, and I would always think about what my answer would be. But that was before the Bible. And then 9/11 happened. I remember that on 9/11 I was home working and got a call from a friend who was in Connecticut, and I believe it was that day or the day after that the radio station that I was listening to started playing Glenn Beck… So, at that time it was interesting to listen to the information regarding why that event took place. And when I realized that the reason why it happened is much larger than what one person can ever change and so again—I'm not a worrywart, but just concerned. You know, as a person who has a heart for people and mission and passion, I would always go to my husband and say, what can we do? The world's falling apart and there's nothing we can do. You can vote somebody into office, but there's no way to fix this. And that's when he would say, well it's not for you to fix. God has everything under control.

It was at this point that Margret remembered something she had brought specifically to show to me. Reaching into her purse, she said, "And I still—I brought it with me, because I've got pencil marks all over it." She pulled out a crimson leather-bound tomb with gold detailing and, after swiping away invisible crumbs from the tabletop between us, set it down gently. She covered the Book with both hands, berry-purple nails tapping the cover. A sudden whiff of the coffee denied to me since early that morning made me glance down and away momentarily. "Don't know it very well," she said with a short laugh, "but have realized that when you put the Bible in your life, your life is much better."

Hesitantly, I asked her if she would show me the Bible. She turned it to face me, its golden letters reflecting the carefully calculated mood lighting of the Panera Bread Café into my face. The golden pages seemed to be flecked with lines of blue, yellow, pink, and white. Pulling the book closer to me, I realized that each dash of color was a crisp Post-it note or a soft fabric sample onto which Margret had carefully penciled the implications of a particular passage or chapter for her life, her son's life, or the lives of her friends and family. Examining the book even more closely, I realized that interspersed with these carefully placed reminders were hastily scrawled realizations, pressed flowers, and flyers from church events, all cleanly and beautifully organized between the pages of her Bible.

Pulling the book back towards her chest, Margret explained, "There are some, their goals may be to have the biggest and the best and live on a certain street, but when you have the Bible in your life you realize that there's much more to life than that, that if you're following what God has in store for you then you, you know, you just don't worry about it. You don't worry about it."

I asked her if the word "mission" had taken on a new meaning for her. She answered, "It's sharing the gospel and helping others to believe in Jesus. That's the mission." I asked if she still thought she had to fix the world, and she smiled. Taking a bite of her bear claw, she said, "No. It's not for me to fix anymore. That's why some of the major political issues that are being debated worldwide right now—I don't know that it really is a topic that is as severe as it is portrayed in the media, because once you become a Bible believing Christian, you understand that God is in control and ultimately, it's, again, not for us to fix everything. You know." I didn't know. I

stumbled into the next question: “Are we talking about—which issues are we talking about?” Smiling, she said, “Oh, well, global warming is one of them.”

I was stunned. After I had struggled to speak to Brian and Keith about climate change, Margret had brought up the conversation about the issue on her own. I was so surprised that I couldn’t think of a follow up, and Margret continued, “Even the presidential situation that we have right now. Whether you have a Democrat or a Republican in there, the president is just one man. One man is not what rules our country, right? So let's be on mission and understand that you know, God is in control.” As I struggled to find a way to return to the topic of climate change, she moved on to reflect on her mission.

“I think that part of the problem with the world's strife is that if Christians would stand up for what they believe in then it would be a better world, because as a Christian you understand that we have to be understanding and follow the Great Commission and be on mission.” I realized that Margret was not talking about climate change, not because she was trying to avoid it—she had, after all, brought it up—but because it was not as important to her as her mission. I asked her if she felt global climate change is real. She tugged at the edges of her apple green oxford and said slowly, “For me, as an individual, my stance is, God is in control. He is not going to let the planet self-destruct unless that was his plan.”

I understood that Margret was doing her best to address concerns I had already mentioned with her but that she does not share with me. She and other evangelical Christians live in what Jane Guyer, following Harding, calls a “gap” in time that is defined by waiting and witnessing in anticipation of the Second Coming, when the

Earth will be destroyed. [36] The result is that "the near future is evacuated" of meaning while Christians focus on the not-too-distant Biblical past and the unknowable Biblical future.[37] Guyer points out that seeking meaning in the near future would be tantamount to "scoffing," the term Peter 3:3 uses to describe those who would question the validity of the Second Coming and seek rationality and validity outside of the Bible. In the context of climate change, evangelicals' evacuation of the near future appears to outsiders as insensitivity to the realities of climate change but is rooted in the deep temporal implications of Biblical inerrancy. The reorientation of converts to Christianity towards a Christian future also reorients what Bambi Schieffelin refers to as their sense of "moral urgency"[38]: where before conversion Margret was genuinely concerned with "fixing" the world, she feels a new sense of responsibility to witness to as many people as possible and save them before the Second Coming.

Margret has not escaped a sense of apocalyptic dread, nor has she acquired a new one with her conversion to Christianity. Margret has simply replaced one apocalyptic future[39] with another. As Stewart and Harding point out, "The distinction between religious and secular apocalypticism is a scholarly one that obscures…how much apocalypticism is a mode of thought that transcends that boundary."[40] In both evangelical and secular perspectives, events like 9/11 and environmental disasters

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[36] Guyer, Jane I. 2007 Prophecy and the near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time. American Ethnologist 34(3): 409–421.
[37] Ibid 414
[38] Schieffelin, Bambi B. 2002 Marking Time The Dichotomizing Discourse of Multiple Temporalities. Current Anthropology 43(S4): S5–S17.
[39] Bessire, Lucas 2011 Apocalyptic Futures: The Violent Transformation of Moral Human Life among Ayoreo-Speaking People of the Paraguayan Gran Chaco. American Ethnologist 38(4): 743–757.
[40] Stewart, Kathleen, and Susan Harding 1999Bad Endings: American Apocalypsis. Annual Review of Anthropology 28: 285–310, 289

register as signs of one potential end or another. When an event happens (as they inevitably do), both secular and religious suspicions regarding the validity of the other approach are confirmed.

Margret's expressions of climate change skepticism and suspicion are part of broader political and theological rhetorics that are enforced by the mutual understanding she shares with her fellow evangelicals. Sitting in the interview with her, I was, I am ashamed to admit, incredulous as to how one book accounted for all of Margret's interpretations of climate change science. However, Christians do not work out the meaning of climate change science alone. Instead, the act of interpretive faith occurs regularly in formal and semi-formal settings such as group Bible study classes, during which faithful interpretations of the Bible are developed and mutually reinforced. The importance of sociality in the facilitation and reinforcement of faith and moral behavior only became clear to me when I joined Margret and some of the others in their Sunday Bible study class.

Intersubjective Unity

On a cold, sunny day after services, I followed Margret to a small classroom behind the baptismal. Plastic folding chairs were arranged in a semi-oval shape facing the door, a pot of hot coffee, and a box of fresh doughnuts steaming the air from the corner of the room. Margret pointed to a woman I had met the week before and said, "I got a red velvet one just for you," than went around the room naming each person's favorite before she got to me. "And I got one with rainbow sprinkles—just for you!" The group laughed and she said, "Before you joined us last week we all agreed you

need a little color in your life." She used her finger to point from the top of my head down to my shoes and back again. The group laughed again as I fumbled for an excuse about watching my figure while eyeing the box of doughnuts. Margret shook her head. "You worry too much. Go get your doughnut and sit down." Walking over to the card table, I picked out a hot pink doughnut smothered in sprinkles and found a seat at the far end of the room. I saw that each seat was covered with a neatly printed sheet of paper listing upcoming events particular to the group: an evening of stacking shelves at the soup kitchen, a road trip to the nearby salt flats to dig up crystals, and a Bible reading relay hosted at the group teacher's home. I asked Margret if the group spent a lot of time together. "Oh yes," said the woman with the red velvet doughnut. "We do everything together. You should join us more!"

As we were chatting, the teacher, Bob, and his wife Lauren arrived. Bob, dabbing at his shining forehead with a handkerchief, shook hands with the members of the group in no particular order while Lauren hovered over the doughnut box, lost in contemplation. Once Lauren had joined him at the front of the room, Bob asked Duane, a tall, angular man to his right, to lead the group in prayer. Duane asked everyone to open his or her Bible to the book of Matthew. Reading aloud from the book, he noted Jerusalemites' use of the word "prophet" instead of the term "Son of God" in describing Jesus to each other.[41] Looking up from his book, he asked us, "Now, why do you think they were shouting "hosanna" if they didn't know he was the Son of God? What does hosanna mean?" "In my book, they translated it as 'praise and blessings,'" said a broad

[41] Matthew 21: 9-11

shouldered man through a mouthful of blueberry doughnut. I recognized him as Peter, Margret's husband.

"Okay, so maybe they were trying to bless him?" "But why bless the Son of God?" The group conferred over the meaning of the word 'hosanna' for a full five minutes before conversation slowed. Bob looked around the room. "Does anyone have anything to add? Someone who has not participated? Miriam?" My mouth went dry at the sound of my name. *How much do I share? Do I say nothing and just continue to observe?* Seeing that Bob was about to continue on to the next subject, I blurted out, "Well, actually, the word hosanna— in Hebrew it doesn't mean 'praise' or 'blessings.' I mean, it has come to mean that, but it is derived from the words 'hoshia-na', which can mean rescue us or save us. " The room was silent, and for a moment, I thought perhaps I had shared the wrong information. But Bob was grinning. "Can you share that again, louder this time?" He asked. I explained again and added that, to my knowledge, the word hosanna was a Hebrew word derived from an Aramaic term that could mean rescue, save, or savior. "Save or savior," Bob repeated. "Save or savior. So the people of Jerusalem called him a prophet, but they also asked him to save them." He looked around the room. "Perhaps they had a premonition?" someone else offered. The entire class murmured in excitement.

"Well, actually, this gets right to the heart of today's lesson," Bob said, reigning in the whispers. "I want to talk about the difference between prophets and prophecy, and what that means to you." He smiled at me before continuing. "The people who had called Jesus a prophet instead of recognizing him as the Son of God may have heard the prophecy and were hoping to be saved, but they had not developed a personal

relationship with Jesus." He added that the passage reminded him of his colleagues at work. "I believe they do not have personal relationships with Jesus and so they do not know that he is coming back. But I do." "Amen," said Peter, Margret's husband. Bob was still smiling at me as he opened his Bible again and asked everyone to turn to the next verse in Matthew.

Later, after class, I asked Bob if he could talk to me more about prophecy in terms of the future and my project. Bob grinned and sat down. I pulled a chair over to him. Peter and Duane pulled their chairs over even though I had not asked them to stay. Margret and Lauren also stayed but sat behind their husbands outside the circle. I realized that despite the women's organizational role in the group, the men were the ones tasked with answering my questions.

"Miriam, are you concerned about the future?" Bob asked. "I am." I asked him if I could show him an article about coral bleaching that I had read that morning before church.

"Sure," he said. I handed him my phone and he held it out so that the other two men could lean over and read it with him. Feeling somewhat small and overwhelmed, I glanced over Peter's shoulder at Margret, who smiled at me reassuringly. Bob handed the phone back to me. I explained that I was confused about the role of prophecy in determining how we should prepare for the future. Bob sighed. "Yeah, I think about that a lot, and it troubles me. I don't know. You ask a good question, a hard question." He looked at the other two men expectantly. Duane turned towards me.

"I think we have to do the best we can, but there's not a lot we can do."

"Yes, not a lot we can do," intoned Bob.

"Like I already told you, I recycle more than our atheist neighbors," Duane added.

"We recycle everything we can, too. And, well, we have over a hundred acres and have planted thousands of trees," Peter agreed.

From outside the circle, Margret said, "We fight local sources of pollution, if we know about them." Bob was nodding his head enthusiastically.

Duane spoke up again. "I mean I'm going to do everything I can but I'm not going to stomp on small business or close their doors." Suddenly, instead of nodding, everyone was shaking his or her head enthusiastically.

"No, I mean, we are not green activists or anything like that," Peter said. Turning to me, Peter explained, "Miriam, I read the current events as signs or sign posts of what is to come. It tells me how to live my life. I know we need to steward, yes—steward what we have, but there is only so much we can do." I asked if they all agreed. After looking at each other, they all did. From her place near the door, Lauren reminded her husband that they needed to leave. The unexpected group interview was suddenly over.

As we put our chairs back into their original places, Duane said to me, "You know, I feel bad for you, spending time with all those scientists who are trying to choke you," and here he held up his hands as if wringing someone's neck, "just choke you with all that negative information." I tried to object, but Margret interjected, "Yes, Miriam, scientists are making things more complicated than they have to be. Why make yourselves miserable when you can be happy?" She grabbed the half-empty box of doughnuts and held them out to me. The group laughed, much as they had earlier

that morning, as I tried to avoid taking another doughnut. Margret insisted, "Just have the pink doughnut with the rainbow sprinkles, and be happy!"

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, I accepted the offer of a second doughnut even as I tried to understand the connection between it and the conversations I just had—or attempted to have. I had understood self-determination and a personal relationship with God to be at the core of Protestantism, as Bob had suggested early in the class. I had therefore focused on mostly one-on-one, rather than group interviews. However, several anthropologists have commented on the importance of social networks in evangelical Christianity.

Omri Elisha explains that while individual action and personal responsibility are central to evangelical Christianity, they exist in tension with the need for fellowship, a term used by evangelicals to describe a spiritual unity achieved with other believers that is both a blessing and a covenant with God.[42] Bible study groups and other social events, Elisha writes, are "collective contexts" where "the bonds of salvation and sociality intersect."[43] Fellowship provides evangelicals with a close network of confidantes that hold each other accountable for upholding Biblical truth, but also support each other in extrapolating meaning from the Bible and applying it to other aspects of their lives. In addition, James Bielo suggests that, rather than viewing evangelical understandings as hierarchically or denominationally determined, open-ended Bible study classes and other social settings should be examined as the site of

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[42] Elisha, Omri 2015 Personhood: Sin, Sociality, and the Unbuffered Self in US Evangelicalism. In The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism. Simon Coleman and Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Eds. New York: NYU Press.
[43] Ibid 42

religious consensus building among evangelicals.[44] His argument applies not only to questions of religious meaning but also to questions of how scientific and political rhetoric are given meaning within evangelical faith. In my conversation with the group, climate change science was integrated as a sign of the apocalypse but also questioned as potentially "negative" (and, it is implied, false) information being fed to me by scientists, who, it was also implied, are politically opposed to the interests of American businesses. I was once again struck, as I had been with Margret, by the ways in which expressions of suspicion and skepticism in religious or secular apocalyptic visions become enmeshed in rhetoric of science and belief regarding climate change. Such suspicions seem to lead to further dichotomization of secularism and religion, contributing to the nearly unworkable tensions surrounding the topic of climate change.

However, I was also struck to hear about the ways in which Margret, Duane, and the others cared for their local environment. Like Keith and Brian, they had accepted science in principle. They value recycling and fight pollution. Much like my own secular scientific training, my interviewees' evangelicalism provides a logical way to talk about issues that matter to all of us—even if the language we use could be a little different. The Bible study groups, like the sermons and other activities, provided important spaces for the creation of a coherence and unity among attendants that I was beginning to understand. However, the significance of these places of worship and fellowship would not become clear to me until I had an opportunity to talk to another recent arrival at the church, Tony.

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[44] Bielo, James S. 2008 On the Failure of "meaning": Bible Reading in the Anthropology of Christianity. Culture and Religion 9(1): 1–21.

The Christian Landscape

It was a Wednesday evening, 6:05 pm, and I was late yet again to a church function—this time, it was this church's equivalent of a Bible study class. The classroom, I realized too late, is the same number as a classroom in another wing of the church but preceded by a different letter—to indicate it's in this wing of the church. *But how was I supposed to know that?* I thought to myself as I round the curve of the main rotunda to where the classroom is. The classroom is just off the main worship room at the far side of the church from where I usually enter. I walked into the room just as Tony was telling the room that his guest might have decided not to show up.

"Oh," he turns his hazel eyes to me as soon I step into the room, "you must be Miriam. Did you get lost? I used to get lost too." The way he said my name stopped me at the door. Not full of hard, bitten off consonants, the way I had learned to hear it in America but rolling together like a hot breeze, full of pine needles, and the smell of bread. For just a moment, I turned my head to breathe in the air and remember. But the memory was gone; the summer camp in the Jerusalem forest has been shut down, and the bakery by Israel's Highway 1 has been bulldozed.

Tony was asking me to have a seat, any seat, and his students, three couples and a single woman with bright henna hair, sat staring at me with frozen custard smiles. The tables in the room are arranged into an angular U-shape. I sat at the corner closest to the door and try to shake off the pine needles.

As the class continued, I found out that Tony is Iranian, not Israeli. His pronunciation only resembles that of my own nominally Persian-Israeli family members. Tony moved to the United States from Iran in 1978, and, as he will tell you

with a chuckle, “That had to be that.” The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran destroyed his plans to return home and prevented his family from joining him in the United States. I was delighted when, three weeks into class, I found out that he came from the same city that my mother’s family had left decades before, but I faltered in describing my own relationship to our Persian heritage. He laughed. “This is how I know you are really Persian. You are unable to let it go, unable to let go of anything—even if you are completely defeated.” I felt the heat bloom in my cheeks and smiled.

Tony beamed back at me and turned back to the board. Like many of my relatives, Tony is short, not much taller than me, and his deeply tanned arms and freckled, balding head reveal a life spent as much out-of-doors as possible. After class one day, we sat in the lobby of the church, all white walls and tile floors, and he described his childhood as one spent in the “beautiful nature” of the mountains around his hometown in Iran. He explained how, every Friday morning, his family would hike to a spot in the mountains to relax for the day before walking home in the evening. Though they were often joined by cousins, neighbors, and friends, the events were heavily gender- and age-segregated: “Adults were pretty much playing backgammon or cards while the kids were playing, the women were cooking. I didn't like it. I wanted us all to be involved.” As a Muslim teenager, Tony vowed that his own weekly family outings would be different. Now a Christian with five adult children of his own, he makes sure that “nature” remains a place of community and fellowship for them and his friends.

I wondered if he was still close to his Muslim family in light of his conversion to Christianity. He explained that it was not conversion to Christianity that caused his

parents consternation but rather his adoption of atheism before he moved to the United States:

> "I'll never forget when, after I finished studying the Quran—it took me about eight or nine years of extensively studying and searching, and I remember I gave the Quran to my dad and said I cannot be the kind of Muslim this book wants me to be. And he said it's okay, but make sure that you have faith because without faith, you won't survive. And I told him, don't worry, I will find something. And I found atheism and common sense."

When he told his parents he had found Christ, he said, their reaction was one of relief: "My mom said well, good, at least he goes back to God. Not the same religion, but at least he believes in God again, which is good. And my dad said, well, I'm glad that he's finally come to his senses."

Noting the emphasis on common and rational sense, both in his parents' words and in his own, I asked him what made sense to him about becoming a Christian. Tony edged forward in his seat and folded his hands into each other like he had been waiting for me to ask him this question. Walking into his first church service was a shock: "I automatically flashed back on my Muslim time. They say these people [Christians] are basically unclean and forbidden people, but they worship their God with much, much more zeal than Muslims, and they *enjoy* their worship." Thinking back to my first few church services, I understood how the vigor of Christian worship could be both shocking and appealing. Tony continued, "Another thing that caught my attention was that in the worshipping time they were using the English language. To me it was like their God could understand their language. Because when I was Muslim, my Allah didn't understand Farsi." Reflecting on his relationship with Allah, his perennial smile

faded. “He understood only Arabic. If I wanted to pray to Him, I had to read in Arabic.”

The long fingers of the setting sun had crept through the lobby, setting ablaze the white walls and floors and silhouetting Tony in such a way that his facial expressions were hard to see. His wispy white hair turned gold and his eyes took on a watery green hue as he stared into the bottom of his tea mug. Turning the mug around in his hands, he sighed. I wondered if he was reflecting on his Muslim past.

I asked Tony if anything else about Christianity made sense to him compared to Islam, snapping him out of his reverie. “First of all,” he said, “there's no comparison at all.” He told me that where Islam seemed to him to be full of darkness, Christianity is full of light and knowledge: “Not to mention my faith is based on the evidence. Historical evidence, all this evidence is right there. Archaeological evidence, everything. Documented.” He set his tea mug down with a sharp crack. I asked him to explain, and he cited recent archaeological discoveries that seem to confirm elements of Biblical narratives. After a moment, he added, “The Old Testament was very interesting to me, because I could relate it to that area. Because it happened in my area. Many people are—King Cyrus, King Darius—they've been buried close to my hometown.” His smile, radiant in the setting sun, spread again as he remembered Shiraz. “So therefore it was very interesting to me to know about them—and Daniel and all these different characters—I could touch them because they lived there. This,” and he pointed to the worship room next door, “this is my history also!”

Noting the late hour, I attempted to transition to the topic of climate change by asking him if that concept made sense to him, too. “Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

"My faith encourages me to pay attention to reality. My faith is not out of reality. It's hand in hand with reality, so this climate change stuff is reality. So, it won't—to me it won't go away with prayer. It will go away with people changing their way of life and attitudes." "Attitudes?" I echoed. I thought there must be a misunderstanding. I hadn't expected to hear him embrace climate change with such ease. He told me the biggest problem was greed: "We have great greed about life and money." I was still stuck on his attitude towards climate change. I asked him to explain again. Tony told me, "I don't see Christianity and science as separate and apart—it is maybe side-by-side. To me this is interesting—how come those scientists are not Christian?" He continued,

> "To me, Christianity is not religion, it is a relationship. And a relationship—if you don't face the reality, you are not going to have relationship. Relationship comes through the reality of both sides… But in scientists—and Christians also—there is always something of a hesitation towards the other. If they really sit back and start thinking, asking questions, why am I leaning away from Christianity? Why am I getting away from science? Let's find the real reasons behind that. Then you will be amazed how many of them can come much closer together."[45]

In her study of urban evangelicals, Anna Strhan argues that evangelical landscapes are organized into places where evangelicals can create fellowship ("cohere") with other evangelicals and places where they cannot.[46] One of the ways in which Christians interpret the potential importance of place is through its relationship to a Biblical landscape. Harding points out that evangelicals experience Biblical landscapes not as mythical or quasi-historical, but real and present. [47] Through Biblical

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[45] Tony Emamgoraishi, interview with Miriam Laytner, April 2017
[46] Strhan, Anna 2015. Aliens & Strangers?: The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals. 1 edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
[47] Harding 2000, 232

references to place, Tony superimposes the evangelical landscape onto the Iranian landscape of his childhood, enabling him to mentally revisit it and his childhood without necessarily returning to his pre-Christian self. For Tony, the creation and recreation of fundamentalist faith harmonizes painful personal memories and historical rupture into the overarching truth of Biblical literalism, allowing him to reclaim space that was denied to him as an atheist.

Similarly, Tony folds evidence of climate change science into his fundamentalist faith. Evidence of anthropogenic climate change points to a world in peril due to the sin of greed, translated into everyday actions that lead to pollution, and increases in greenhouse gases. The way to save the planet is not through the cessation of action, but the elimination of the sin of greed itself. In this way, not only Iran, but also the entire planet is cast in Biblical terms, allowing Tony to contextualize climate change science, history, archaeology, trauma, and memory into a cohesive Biblically inerrant whole.

The white haired lady senses that I am not praying. Still gripping my right hand, she reaches across her body with considerable effort to pat my shoulder. "It's going to be okay," she says again. At the front of the room, Pastor is descending the stairs from the stage to stand on the floor of the church. Behind him on the stage, Keith sees me and raises two fingers in a goofy salute. Pastor says that now is the time to pray for those who are lost to come forward and be found. He bows his head as people around me shout "Amen!" A few men and women with tears in their eyes raise their hands towards the cross on the wall. Surrounded by the lights, the smiling people and the

music all around me, I briefly envision an alternative future for myself that anthropology could never give me—a future free of apocalyptic climate change. I imagine myself breaking through the restraints and self-imposed distance of the field, squeezing the white-haired woman's hand before walking down the aisle and telling Pastor that I want to be baptized. I see that Brian has come to stand beside Pastor as they listen to the story of a weeping young man. I want to be that young man. I remember Brian's prayer that I would find Jesus during my time in the church and imagine him and Pastor welcoming me to the community. I would be saved. I would meet and marry someone from this wealthy Oklahoma City suburb, have a decent salary, live in a house with central air conditioning, and send my children to a good school. I would eat spaghetti on Wednesdays and doughnuts on Sundays with my friends. I would volunteer at a soup kitchen once a week for a few months before giving up. If the planet continued to warm, it would be as God willed it. I could and would stop worrying about it.

It is such a surprising thought that I am knocked back a half step and bump into the pew from which I had just stood up. The seat hits the inside of the back of my knee, and I totter but do not fall. Catherine notices but says nothing. Looking up at the neon purple cross set into the wall, I think about the people I have met here and understand that such thoughts do a disservice to them and their genuine experiences. The people I have spoken to derive their understanding of climate change from a deep, personal relationship with God through the inerrant text of the Bible. Their understandings are not socially constituted but socially reinforced, and though I crave the fellowship they have extended to me in the last few months, I recognize that it is for the wrong reasons.

For people who live their life according to the Bible, the history and future of life on Earth are and always have been intimately bound up with the history and future of human life. The massive rupture threatened by global climate change—a climate change apocalypse—is received and integrated by evangelical Christians into the temporal aspect of fundamentalist faith. What I had taken to be a future free from the urgency of climate change is actually marked by a moral urgency oriented towards a different future. However, our futures are not so different as the past 200 years may suggest.

Anthropologists studying Christianity have already begun to recognize the ways in which Christianity and secular science originated out of the same historical moment and share some of the goals for truth, clarity and a freedom from magical and symbolic thinking.[48] The Enlightenment, often represented as the historical beginning of the dichotomization between secular and religious thinking,[49] also represents the beginning of a dichotomization between the human and geological temporal scales that has been difficult to overcome.

There are, however, avenues for overcoming these difficulties. In this thesis, I have attempted to begin to address the question of climate change denial—how is climate change denial possible, given the evidence for its existence?—by questioning and ultimately setting aside the framework of denial itself, which is a product of these historical and conceptual dichotomies. Instead, I draw on the work of anthropologists

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[48] Keane, Webb 2002 Sincerity, "Modernity," and the Protestants. Cultural Anthropology 17(1): 65–92.
[49] Cannell, Fenella 2010 The Anthropology of Secularism. Annual Review of Anthropology 39: 85–100.

who study Christianity to show that what non-evangelicals take to be denial of climate change is actually a series of understandings that have been arrived out through both personal introspection and in unity with other Christians. Rather than beginning with an understanding of science as truth, fundamentalist evangelical Christians' worldview rests on an understanding of the Bible as the inerrant word of God. New and potentially contradictory information, such as evidence of climate change, is integrated as evidence of God's omnipotence and proof of the Bible's accuracy. In a world shaped by the Bible, climate change is evaluated not only in terms of eschatological signs, but also in the shadow of the long, troubled history between proponents of science and Christians. In my conversations with Southern Baptists, concern for the environment was voiced as an interest in recycling, fighting pollution, and reevaluating America's relationship with the fossil fuel industry. They also demonstrated willingness and even eagerness to explore the science of global climate change with me. Evangelical Christian understandings of climate change are therefore not simply the products of dogma or personal experience, they are the product of integration—intellectually rigorous and socially supported through a process that binds them to other Christians in their faith—of multiple registers of experience into an organized whole made in the image of a coherent God.

Though the truths claimed by the parallel projects of science and Christianity cannot be settled in a side-by-side comparison, embedded as they are in different worldviews, they may be engaged in dialogue with each other. It is in these dialogues that we may start to see potential fissures in our understandings of each other—small openings where similar concerns can serve as the foundations for effecting real change.

However, several questions remain at the conclusion of this project. First, there are an increasing number of evangelical Christians who interpret climate change science into the need for stewardship. Why do some evangelical Christian denominations and individuals endorse political action on climate change while Southern Baptists, by and large, do not? A larger, comparative study would seek out different interpretations of Scripture, particularly concepts of stewardship and dominion, across groups and denominations, and attempt to account for these differences. In addition, although I have argued that conversations about climate change must start from a point of mutual respect, I have not yet begun to explore the political implications of such a project. Christian perspectives on other religious and political issues, such as the rights of women, gay marriage and abortion were never brought up during the course of my fieldwork. However, concern over these issues exacerbates tensions between Christians and non-Christians voters outside of the debate on climate change. How do we overcome real, embittered differences for sustained periods of time in order to have conversations about climate change? These conversations must happen—we have no choice. To quote climate change historians Christophe Bonneiul and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "the future of our planet is at stake."[50]

I think back to my last conversation with Tony as we left our Bible study class for the final time. The sky had already taken on ultraviolet and rose tones; the first stars could be seen in the darkening East. Oklahoma has always been one of my favorite

[50] Bonneuil, Christophe, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz 2016. The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us. London. 21

places for sunsets. Tony turned to me and said, "You know what I always tell people?" Standing in the parking lot, I waited for an answer. "Don't come to Jesus. If you are happy with Islam, keep Islam. If you are happy with atheism, keep atheism. You can only come to Christ if you are still lost." I turned to face him, incredulous. "You Miriam, you have your thing. Science and religion, they are not so different. I am a teacher. You are a teacher too. I am an evangelist but you are an evangelist, too. We are just trying to save each other." He passed one hand in front of the other, like a sliding screen. I understood what he meant. Ships in the night. He lowered his right hand to shake mine, the other on his heart. "Good luck," he said.

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