



## Commentary

### Earth in the Balance

#### **The faith community will need to step up its role as protectors of creation.**

by Alan Betts

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By profession I am a climate scientist. For almost 40 years I have explored the puzzles and complexities of the earth's weather and climate, looking deeper for insight and understanding, to help us craft models of the earth system so we can look more clearly into the future: the weather next week or the climate for our grandchildren. So why would a scientist, with a very eclectic understanding of the spiritual, be speaking to a community of faith? It is because it is time for all of us to reflect more deeply on our responsibility for the stewardship of this planet.

In less than a century, our human industrial society has become the major driver determining the future of the earth, its fauna, forests, and its very climate. We have gone from being one small part of creation—who thought of ourselves a little self-importantly as rather separate from it—to the central player. We have become as gods without the wisdom or understanding or any deep acceptance of our responsibility for the future of the earth.

In fact, this has not happened by conscious choice. The discovery of the rich source of energy in fossil fuels drove the industrial revolution; and our economy, if it continues with business-as-usual, is on a path to burn all our fossil fuel reserves in a few centuries. This will return to the atmosphere fossil carbon that has been locked in the earth for hundreds of millions of years and propel us to a future with a transformed planet with no ice caps and a sea level 200 feet higher. We don't know all the details, just the broad outlines, but we know enough (and every year the diligent work of tens of thousands of scientists fills in more of the map).

The task is huge, and the threat may seem overwhelming, but the astonishing thing is we already have everything we need. The same technology that created our current human-driven world has at the same time given us all we need to change it, and the cost of transforming our society is tiny compared with the cost of doing nothing. How often do we have to ask where our real allegiance lies? When our human world is threatening the natural world, it is surely time to rethink our priorities.

Rather than honestly confronting the coming reality, and starting to make choices that face up to our real responsibilities, most of Western society, it seems, would rather look away. Those with large investments in the fossil fuel economy are investing in deceit to prop up their market share as long as possible. Many Christians continue to think in terms of their exclusive path to individual salvation, with minimal awareness of our collective responsibility as humanity, regardless of religion, for the creation. Politicians demonize the "other" (whether environmentalist or Islamist). Many Christians, politicians, business interests, and participants in our acquiescent consumer society cling to the same business-as-usual scenario, even though this is taking us and the earth on a path we should fear to tread.

Faith communities surely see the links between peace, justice, and our one earth. Our deep interconnectedness is now our one reality. The laws of science and the laws of creation are not separate: They show us the path ahead. There is only one world and one reality; it is our understanding that is partial. We try to understand it with all the tools we have, because with understanding we get a clearer picture of what is truth, in all its paradox, richness, and complexity. For it is the truth that sets us free—free to face our responsibilities to each other and to this world.

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