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# Roundtable on Climate Destabilization and the Study of Religion

## Introduction

Todd LeVasseur\*

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THIS ROUNDTABLE GRAPPLES with two interlocked questions: (1) Might we need to change how we study and theorize about religion on a planet undergoing anthropogenic climate destabilization, and if so, how; and (2) What does it mean to be a religious studies and/or a biblical scholar professional, working as an employee at an institution of learning on a biophysical campus, on a planet undergoing rapid anthropogenic climate destabilization? It seems these are soon to become the most important questions facing our field, and this roundtable intends to help generate and shape a needed discussion about how AAR members and readers of the *JAAR* might approach answers to these questions.

My current appointment is in the Department of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston, SC, where I also teach introduction to environmental studies classes. I thus straddle dual worlds, where as an environmental humanist I am continually exposed to emerging consensus science on climate change and religious responses to this rapid change, amongst other religion–environment-related topics. I was exposed to the reality of human-generated climate change as an undergraduate in the 1990s, and

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\*Todd LeVasseur, Department of Religious Studies, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA. E-mail: levassurtj@cofc.edu.

for over twenty years have been following this phenomenon, where I now expose students to the science and ethics behind it in my own classes. The numbers over this time period, and the future projections, have all trended in one direction: increasingly dire consequences, for both human well-being and the well-being of almost every other species on this planet. This causes me great angst and existential concern, and no small amount of stress and sadness and rage. Much of this is because there is no realistic, sustained, critical response to the sobering scenarios painted by climate destabilization, especially from those in power in today's globalized economy and international geopolitics. And also, outside of a few voices in the religion and nature/ecology and ecotheology subsections of our fields, there has been no sustained attention brought to climate change from religious studies and biblical scholar specialists. This roundtable attempts to remedy this silence, hopefully opening the space for a much needed dialogue about the realities of a much warmer planet, especially in relation to the two questions above.

The work of my colleagues on this topic is better than I even dreamed, and in the following pages you will encounter Jace Weaver's highly readable, provocative perspective on indigenous religions and climate change; Forrest Clingerman's eloquent exploration of what climate change might signify for theologians; Lisa Sideris' nuanced critique of certain narrative stories that are emerging as a response to climate change, and the need to always be leery of power dynamics in human communities of practice; Laurie Zoloth's exegesis of Abrahamic scriptures and what an ecohermeneutics of suspicion about industrial/economic myths and the impacts such interpretation has on our ethics as citizens might entail, given a warming planet; Vinay Lal's deft work as a historian on the implications of climate change and its related discourses in the academy from a Global South, and especially South Asian, perspective; and lastly, a hopeful, concrete submission from Robert Puckett and Bobbi Patterson about the work of AAR's sustainability task force to date, and the visionary success they have had in organizing our annual meetings so they are more sustainable and climate-neutral.

In the year-long process of organizing and now submitting this roundtable, two scientific findings have made their rounds, which did not factor in to my own submission. I share them here. One is the release of the National Climate Assessment.<sup>1</sup> This one thousand and three hundred page report summarizes the meticulous work of over three hundred climate experts guided by a Federal Advisory Committee, and they find that at best, there will be a minimum three degree Fahrenheit temperature

<sup>1</sup><http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/>. Accessed June 7, 2014.

rise, globally, by 2100, and up to a ten degree Fahrenheit rise if current trends continue. Note that 80% of this rise in temperature has been since 1980, and the report concludes with 95% surety that this warming, which is ten times faster than the historical norm, is human induced. Also note that Congress authorized that such an Assessment should be released every four years, but under the Bush/Cheney administration, no such report was released. Infer from that what you will, but keep in mind Howard Zinn's quip that there is no neutral seat on a moving train.

The other report suggests that the West Antarctic ice sheet is "locked in" to melting in its entirety within two hundred years, no matter what humans do about climate change.<sup>2</sup> In other words, this study should make crystal clear the larger implications of climate change: industrial civilization based on fossil fuels is over. Our planet's varied ecosystems as currently evolved cannot deal with the billions of tons of methane and carbon dioxide our species (with gross imbalances of power and access within this) is relentlessly releasing every year. We know that with the onset of the agricultural revolution and its global spread, that the "end game" and denouement of this particular experiment was, by definition, collapse, occurring at some geological point in time. How much sooner once we started using liquid carbon to power the industrial machine. It appears that the implications of these two reports suggest that collapse is guaranteed and we are given a clearer picture of when it will happen: either in a few years, or at most two hundred. This perverse reality should be the only one we deal with as a species, from here moving forward. How do we do so as scholars of religion? We invite you to engage and actively contribute to the following perspectives, and more so, to cultivate your own, in your own classrooms, and on your respective campuses, to help us adapt to a much warmer planet. The train is moving, and quickly.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/12/us/nasa-antarctica-ice-melt/index.html>. Accessed June 7, 2014.