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Science and religion unite on climate

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In the wake of the most significant scientific report to date on the potentially dire consequences of global warming, a ray of hope has emerged. Ironically, it emanates from the convergence of forces that have often been at odds. One force, the world of science, has long been on the forefront of the issue of climate change. Another equally powerful force, religion, has often remained on the sidelines -- until recently.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body of more than 2,000 of the world's top scientists from more than 100 nations, stated in a Feb. 2 report that global warming is "unequivocal," that it is rapidly changing the nature of our planet and its ecosystems, and that it is "very likely" being caused by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels.

In the course of the last decade, a significant movement within the faith community has been mobilizing around the call to care for God's creation, the web of life that sustains us all. This calling is the essence of religious life, and people of faith are beginning to hear it, even as scientists sound the alarm that we may be nearing a climactic tipping point.

We view science and religion as powerful potential partners. The hope is that the clarity of the science will inspire a concerted effort by the leaders in both communities and thus avoid the most catastrophic consequences of the climate crisis.

Scientists have also provided us with insights that raise serious ethical challenges, particularly the issue of the choice between stewardship and fatalism -- the moral dilemma of our time. We can accept the challenge with hope or sit on our hands and do nothing. For people of faith, the moment of truth has come, and we must open our eyes to the knowledge that modern science is showing us. The choice offered us is to move beyond denial and doubt that global warming is caused by human activities to play an active part in a global effort to save this fragile creation or suffer the consequences.

The active involvement of religion is necessary for wide-scale social change. Social movements from the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movement have been led by the religious community. Some 64 percent of Americans belong to a

church or synagogue, and nearly 50 percent attend a service every week, according to a 2005 Gallup poll. (By comparison, only 14 percent are active participants in environmental organizations.)

Evidence that religious people are making the choice in favor of environmental stewardship is coming in every day. This fall, more than 400,000 people in congregations across the country viewed Al Gore's global warming documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," in packed houses. Almost every major denomination has adopted statements of concern on global warming. Evangelicals, often skeptical of science, are breaking with the president to join the call for action on reductions in greenhouse gases.

Science and religion have proved to be capable of independently inspiring social change and reshaping global consciousness. Just imagine what these forces could do together, in a united effort to reverse the damage we have done to our planet. In 2007, we stand at a crossroads and there is a choice we must all make. Thanks to science, we have the knowledge of the damage we have caused to our planet, and how to stop it. Greenhouse gases need to be stopped.

Now, with religious institutions becoming engaged, will we, as a society, have the collective wisdom to break with our destructive behavior and choose another way? We have seen the religious community putting aside differences to solve a moral problem in the past with issues such as slavery and the civil-rights movement. We might also see differences put aside and rejoice in the marriage of religion and science. It is a pivotal moment, and the consequences of our choice will be felt for generations to come.

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