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President Trump and the Spiritual and Political Challenge of Climate Chaos

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“There is a fifth dimension...It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of [our] fears and the summit of [our] knowledge.... It is an area we call the Twilight Zone.”

Rod Serling’s famed series introduction may have seemed eerily apt for many Americans and others as they witnessed the formerly unthinkable: the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his official inauguration January 20. But, bewilderingly, and with appearances to the contrary, this is neither a *Twilight Zone* episode nor a special edition of *The Apprentice*. No credits will roll signaling the end of this show, allowing us to turn off our screens, shake our heads, and segue back from entertainment to reality. A Trump presidency is real, and it is here, ready or not.

And this new reality reveals many gathering, forbidding clouds on the environmental horizon. Within minutes of Mr. Trump taking the oath of office, for example, his team wiped clean any mention of climate change or global warming from the White House website.

Such a move is frighteningly consistent with Mr. Trump’s dismissal of climate change science, as evinced by a tweet he sent Jan. 29, 2014, which read: “Snowing in Texas and Louisiana, record setting freezing temperatures throughout the country and beyond. Global warming is an expensive hoax!” Earlier, on Nov. 6, 2012, he had tweeted, “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” Mr. Trump later said he was only joking.

Yet his sundry transition team members and Cabinet nominees, however, are no laughing matter.

Mr. Trump tapped Myron Ebell, a leading sceptic of the scientific consensus on climate change, to head his transition team. He also chose Rex Tillerson, chief executive of Exxon Mobil, to serve as Secretary of State.

And his choice to lead the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Scott Pruitt, is certainly no joke.

As Oklahoma Attorney General, Mr. Pruitt is infamous for his cozy ties to the oil and gas industry, and for suing the EPA on behalf of those industries to obliterate clean air and water regulations.

As Eric Schaeffer, former director of E.P.A.'s office of civil enforcement, observed recently in *The New York Times*, earthquakes, once a rarity in Oklahoma, now occur several times a day on average, with hundreds being recorded each year. Despite findings from state geologists that these quakes are linked to oil and gas operations injecting wastewater under ground, Mr. Pruitt "did little, if anything" to address the issue. He was receptive, however, to the over \$300,000 campaign contributions from the oil and gas sector.

Mr. Pruitt's disdain for the environment prompted Casey Camp-Horneck, writing in the Washington-based newspaper *The Hill*, to claim that making Mr. Pruitt head of the EPA is akin to "putting [General George] Custer in charge of Indian Affairs."

The Pruitt nomination, coupled with Mr. Trump's earlier statements that he would "cancel" America's commitment to the UN Paris climate accord and end the "war on coal," have alarmed both secular and faith-based environmentalists in the US and around the world.

"As a religious environmentalist I am dismayed and scared for what this means for the poor, for creation and for all of our descendants," declared Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, chair of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, in a recent Religious News Service interview. Rabbi Scherlinder Dobb was giving voice to many concerns within faith communities fear as Mr. Trump assumes power.

Such fear was reflected in a petition released in January by the Catholic Climate Covenant demanding Mr. Trump "demonstrate bold leadership" on climate by following through on three fronts:

- 1) keeping the U.S. in the Paris Agreement and honouring its pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions between 26 percent and 28 percent (from 2005 levels) by 2025;
- 2) paying the US \$3 billion pledged to the Green Climate Fund to assist developing nations in climate mitigation and adaptation measures, including sustainable energy; and

- 3) implementing the Clean Power Plan, the U.S. EPA's rules to reduce carbon emissions from coal- and gas-fired power plants.

The petition, endorsed by the Global Catholic Climate Movement, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Sisters of Mercy, Franciscan Action Network, and many other Roman Catholic groups, states that, "Climate change is already harming millions of people across the U.S. and around the globe." Citing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) support for a national carbon pollution standard and Pope Francis's encyclical, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home, which declares an "urgent need" to reduce fossil fuel use, the petition concludes: "We urge you to take swift and meaningful action before it is too late."

Moreover, on January 17, twenty US interfaith groups sent a strongly worded letter to US Senators objecting to the nomination of Mr. Pruitt as head of the EPA. The letter states that Mr. Pruitt would potentially put "vulnerable communities at risk for environmental harm and prioritize polluters over human health." The faith organizations, including Interfaith Power and Light, the National Council of Churches, and Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, urge the Senators to consider rejecting Mr. Pruitt, "who has a demonstrated history of ties to special-interest groups, has fought against the very agency he may head, and has worked at cross purposes for healthy communities and a healthy environment."

As these responses suggest, the Trump administration, while it poses grave challenge, cannot impose despair. The spiritual and political roots of modern environmentalism are long and deep in the US. From the celebration of wildness in Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the sublime nature prose and conservation legacy of John Muir (1838-1914), the revolutionary "land ethic" of wildlife ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), through the DDT-busting analysis of Rachel Carson (1907-1964), the policy-altering advocacy of Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs, the uncovering of environmental racism by Robert Bullard, and the influential spiritual writings of "geologist" Thomas Berry (1914-2009), the US has been graced with an innovative tradition of environmental reflection and advocacy, now, fortunately, embraced by many religious communities. In such soil, and with such long and deep roots, it may not be so easy for the Trump administration to extirpate the environmental gains across the US political landscape.

In preserving this legacy, faith groups will be called to a critical and special role. As author and activist Mary Jo Leddy recently shared with me via email, the most important thing faith communities can do now "is to provide an alternate point of reference -- to remind people that the earth is in God's hands and each of us has a place in the world." While noting that the

constant tweeting from Trump “can throw us all off centre,” she avers that “our faith can remind us of who and what we are for, what we believe in and hope for.” For Mary Jo Leddy, “If we are only against Trump we may become like what we are fighting against...disorderly and provocative.”

As we enter a “disorderly” Trump presidency, this “middle ground” between “light and shadow,” “science and superstition,” facts and fears, the steadfast, compassionate, and grounding role that faith communities can and have played may prove pivotal, not only for environmental protection, but for our collective sanity.

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