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Religion's role in the climate debate

It is the duty of the religious, scientific and political communities to persuade a cynical public that global warming is a very real threat



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A recent Observer Ipsos Mori poll found that the majority of the British public is still not convinced that climate change is caused by humans, and believes, despite the assertion by 2,500 experts on the United Nations international panel on climate control, that scientists are exaggerating the problem. The poll concluded that many did not want to restrict their lifestyles and only a small minority thought they need to make "significant and radical changes".

It makes a refreshing change that it is scientists who are coming under the cosh, since very often it is those same scientists — including the high priest of atheism, Richard Dawkins — who have led the ferocious assault on religion and its value to modern society.

A few days before the poll was reported, a delegation, of which I was a member, presented to Hilary Benn MP, secretary of state for the environment, a photograph petition taken at the recent biennial conference of Liberal Judaism, a group of 34 synagogues representing some 10,000 Jews.

A session at the conference had been devoted to a debate on climate change and was addressed by a rabbi, a senior researcher from the oil industry and an academic, and at its end those participants who wished to gathered for the photograph.

The photograph called for two major provisions in the climate change bill: that the level of carbon emission reduction should be 80% (and not the original 60%, which is based upon dated science); and that action and its reporting by industry should be mandatory.

Liberal Judaism's representatives made such a demand, knowing that every one of us would have to pay a price, not because it is fashionable but because our tradition teaches us that the natural world is "loaned" to humanity to exploit but not to destroy.

Benn spent more than 45 minutes with the delegation, appeared to take seriously what it was saying, and observed that "even cabinet ministers need support".

Religion and politics are both human phenomena connected with various aspects of human life. Religion ought to impel its adherents to act and politics is the means by which that action is implemented. Both politics and religion can be double-faced. They can contribute to the welfare of individuals by, for example, serving the poor and vulnerable. But equally they may be utilised to support oppression and exploitation.

It is, therefore, not difficult to "blame" either religion or politics for the ills of our world, but suspicion and cynicism — whether of politics, science or religion — are cut from the same cloth and are equally destructive. Fundamentalists of all kinds expose the weaknesses of an alternative system but are blind to its strengths. The faults in both our modern political system and our ancient religions can be rectified but their strengths may be hard to replace.

If the world faces climate catastrophe then maybe it is time for the scientific and religious communities to come together, working with governments, to persuade a suspicious and cynical population that it is in their own interests — and particularly the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable of the world's inhabitants — to act now. And if you are religious, it should not be difficult to persuade you.