

## Post-Truth, Climate Change, and the Idea of the Modern Catholic University

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“The Catholic University is the place where the Church does its thinking.” Among the late Fr. Theodore Hesburgh’s many memorable contributions during his 35-year tenure as the University of Notre Dame’s president, this simple phrase has come to epitomize the spirit of the modern Catholic University. When Fr. Hesburgh introduced this idea, emphasizing the importance of academic freedom, welcoming renowned scholars of all faiths (and even without faith), and actively campaigning for civil rights and nuclear disarmament, some observers wondered whether Notre Dame’s Catholicity was in danger of being compromised. Yet today, it is hard to imagine that anyone would disagree with this principle. Modern Catholic universities, like Notre Dame and the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, now rival the best secular universities in the world. Thanks to their leadership, the Church’s ability to act in a world beset by innumerable crises—poverty, the displacement of populations, war, and ecological disaster—is enhanced by having the best young minds at its disposal. To quote the words of your long-time faculty colleague, St. John Paul II, the Catholic University’s privileged task is to foster an environment in which its students can “unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of

reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as important, Fr. Hesburgh viewed the Catholic university’s engagement with modernity as a moral imperative. In his estimation, the Catholic university would do its students a great disservice if it failed to expose them to world class faculty in their classrooms, whether they be physicists, theologians, biologists, mathematicians, or many other contributors to our profession. Without these educators, the graduates of Catholic universities would be unprepared to compete with their counterparts from the best secular institutions. As a result, the Church’s ability to live up to its two-fold mission to search for the truth and to be a source of the certainty of “the fount of truth” would be imperiled.

This straightforward understanding of the Catholic university’s mission seems all the more important for the modern academy today. We live at a time that scholars have dubbed the era of “post-truth.” Indeed, the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary were so impressed with the concept that they deemed it the Word of the Year in 2016. In this era, we find ourselves all-too-frequently wrestling with statements from politicians and political pundits that border on the absurd. When a newscaster pointed out to Rudi Giuliani, the White House

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<sup>1</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html)

advisor and former mayor of New York City, in August 2018 that “truth is truth,” Giuliani responded: “No, it isn’t truth. Truth isn’t truth.”<sup>2</sup>

The philosopher and ethicist, Lee McIntyre, has described post-truth as “a rejection of the idea that some things are true irrespective of how we feel about them.”<sup>3</sup> In a climate of post-truth, what is accepted as fact is trumped by our feelings about the world that we prefer, not the world as it is. Thus, people are tempted to treat the findings of scientists selectively. They choose the truth when it supports their preferences and dismiss it as “fake news” when it does not. Paradoxically, they trust their mechanics to follow the scientific method to fix their cars and their doctors to identify and treat their illnesses, but they reject this method of truth-seeking when it contradicts their *feelings*.

Post-truth is not a new phenomenon. When I was growing up in the 1960s, many Americans rejected the strong scientific consensus that smoking causes cancer. We can assign much of the blame for this erroneous belief to the aggressive campaigns of the tobacco industry cast doubt upon what is now universally regarded as a demonstrated fact.<sup>4</sup> This denialist thinking was also due to an all-too-human inclination---some people simply liked to

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<sup>2</sup> At <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/420729-giulianis-truth-isnt-truth-named-most-notable-quote-this-year> Both the *Associated Press* and the *Washington Post* chose this statement as the most notable quote of 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product that Defined America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

smoke! Similarly, the inclination to put feelings ahead of facts continues to influence many Americans' attitudes about evolutionary science. In the town of Petersburg, Kentucky, a Creation Museum allows one to wander through exhibits in which human beings, dinosaurs, birds, and butterflies are portrayed as having co-habited the earth only 6,000 years ago. One can even climb into a supposedly full-scale replica of Noah's ark.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to the confluence of a variety of factors—the global reach of social media, the growing commercialization of human activity, and a new wave of populist politics in western democracies--the allure of putting feelings ahead of facts is now even more widespread. To spell out this point, I would like to share some observations about one of the most profound examples of post-truth thinking: the rejection of the scientific consensus about the existence, the causes, and the dangers of global climate change. In the October 2018 assessment report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of 1,300 independent scientific experts from countries all over the world came to four sobering conclusions. First, the scientists affirmed that the evidence for global warming is unequivocal: the earth's "atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen." Second, they stated that there is more than a 95 percent probability that human activities over the past half century have played a major role in bringing about these changes. Third, they listed scores of examples of the breadth and depth of these dangers. Among these perils, they pointed to vast impairments to people's health, their livelihoods, and their personal security; the growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, such as floods

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<sup>5</sup> <https://creationmuseum.org/>

and wild fires; and the extinction of numerous forms of plant and animal life. They also acknowledged the profoundly destabilizing impact of climate change on social stability. To cite a prominent example, global warming has played a central role in the mass migration of peoples from the countries of the South to the North. As we now see in Europe, this exodus has had significant political ramifications. Finally, the panel made a dire prediction. Unless we take drastic steps now, we have only twelve years before global warming will exceed 1.5 degrees centigrade and these threats to our well-being become irreversible.<sup>6</sup>

In this lecture, I do not propose to say what should be done to address these dangers. I am not a natural scientist. Nor am I a policymaker. Even if I were, I want to emphasize that reasonable people can disagree about questions of policy. Consider the contemporary European debate about how to limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from coal plants. Is the best approach to shut the plants down or is it to impose a carbon tax? Are there other options? I don't know. Instead, as an educator from a Catholic university, I want to address what people believe about climate change and whether one can devise convincing arguments to correct their views when they are mistaken.

If we focus exclusively on the attitudes of US citizens, it is clear that my compatriots have conflicted views about the findings of climate scientists. On the one hand, a recently published Gallup survey shows that a growing number of Americans agree that global warming is a fact (66 percent) and that it is primarily caused by human activities (64 percent). On the other hand, less than half of those surveyed (45 percent) think that climate change will have a

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<sup>6</sup> At [https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15\\_spm\\_final.pdf](https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf)

serious impact during their lifetimes.<sup>7</sup> Notably, American public opinion is also sharply divided along political lines. Only four percent of self-described Democrats think the seriousness of global warming is exaggerated. In contrast, 69 percent of Republicans say that it is. Similarly, 89 percent of Democrats say that global warming is caused by human activity, but only 35 percent of Republicans agree. Indeed, only 42 percent of Republicans say that most scientists agree that global warming is occurring. Yet, it is an indisputable *fact* that the overwhelming majority of scientists agree about the existence and causes of this phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

Putting aside policy issues, what can universities do to correct these uninformed views? In one respect, the answer is straightforward. Since the function of the modern academy is to pursue and teach the truth, we have a professional responsibility as educators—as chemists, social scientists, ethicists, or as experts in other fields—to convey what we know to be fact to a rising generation of young people. Fortunately, there is substantial evidence that universities can and do succeed at this task. Scientific studies have repeatedly shown a direct correlation between education and climate change awareness. In a November 2015 article in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature Climate Change*, researchers used a remarkably comprehensive survey of 119 countries—the largest ever about climate-change beliefs—to confirm that educational

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<sup>7</sup> At [https://news.gallup.com/poll/231530/global-warming-concern-steady-despite-partisan-shifts.aspx?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axisgenerate&stream=top-stories](https://news.gallup.com/poll/231530/global-warming-concern-steady-despite-partisan-shifts.aspx?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axisgenerate&stream=top-stories)

<sup>8</sup> See James Lawrence Powell, “Climate Scientists Virtually Unanimous Anthropogenic Global Warming is True,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 35 (2015): 5-6.

attainment is the single largest predictor worldwide of the accuracy of respondents' attitudes. They determined that this awareness is particularly strong in the advanced democracies of Europe and Latin America. Additionally, the study's authors demonstrated that access to communications media is another strong predictor.<sup>9</sup> The modern university specializes in both of these practices: education and communications.

Nonetheless, these findings leave us with a puzzle. Why do educated and reasonable people, many of them in the US, still resist the scientific consensus that climate change is occurring and that its principal causes are not natural but anthropogenic? If confirming evidence is growing, one would expect it to be difficult for an educated individual with ready access to the scientific information to hold any other view. For that matter, given the immediate threat to human existence, he or she would regard the urgency of confronting the implications of these findings as self-evident.

Psychologists have dedicated decades of research to accounting for this kind of counterintuitive thinking. One theory focuses on the concept of motivational reasoning. According to this theory, people are motivated to accept new information when it confirms their preexisting beliefs and reject it when it contradicts them. This disposition is particularly acute when an individual perceives his or her sense of self-worth to be at stake.<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Tien Ming Lee, Ezra M. Markowitz, Peter D. Howe, Chia-Ying Ko, Anthony A. Leiserowitz, "Predictors of public climate change awareness and risk perception around the world," *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 5 (2015): 1014-20.

<sup>10</sup> McIntyre, p. 45.

the intensely polarized conditions of contemporary America, Republican and Democratic voters alike have become even more stubbornly committed to the platforms of their respective parties. This may account for one of the Gallup survey's most surprising findings. Despite the overwhelming consensus among scientists, the percentage of Republicans who believed that the evidence of global warming is "exaggerated" actually rose from 2017 (66 percent) to 2018 (69 percent). Correspondingly, the percentage of those who believed that most scientists affirm the existence of climate change fell dramatically (from 53 percent to 42 percent).<sup>11</sup>

The theory of motivational reasoning is complemented by an equally robust theory: conformational bias. According to this theory, people will look for evidence that confirms their beliefs in cognitively dissonant circumstances and reject contradictory information. One expression of this bias is the inclination is to question scientists' motives. When researchers at the Pew Research Center presented survey participants in 2016 with a variety of factors that might influence scientists' findings, only 32 percent included "the best available evidence" among their responses, whereas a larger percentage, 36 percent, included "scientists' desire to advance their careers."<sup>12</sup> To be sure, like anyone else, scientists have complex motivations. Still, there is no reason to assume that these attributions of bias are well grounded. For example, I do not find the argument about "career advancement" persuasive. If one accepts the standard of peer review that is followed by all scientific journals, it makes more sense that a researcher

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<sup>11</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/231530/global-warming-concern-steady-despite-partisan-shifts.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/>



would seek to identify evidence that disconfirms some aspect of the majority consensus than evidence that confirms it. This is the point of scientific inquiry. Even modestly disconfirming evidence about climate change would enhance one's career, not jeopardize it. The simple requirement for making such an argument would be that the claim be verifiable and falsifiable.

Here we return to challenge presented by my puzzle. If motivational and conformational biases are so pervasive, is there any chance of correcting the mistaken views of those who reject the truth about climate change? My answer is that Catholic universities have a unique advantage over their secular peers in responding to this challenge. Like their peers, they can continue to provide the doubters with scientific evidence that contradicts their beliefs. But, they have an additional opportunity. When they are addressing religious believers, they can invoke "the certainty of the fount of truth." In this case, they can alert the doubters to an obligation that would exist *even if* the evidence for climate change were inconclusive. This obligation stems from the call to humanity to be good stewards of God's creation.

To make this point, I am fortunate to be able to draw on Pope Francis's acute analysis of man's relationship with "sister earth" (St. Francis of Assisi) in the recent encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*.<sup>13</sup> I believe that this statement provides us with a provocative guide into the Catholic university's two-fold, truth-telling mission. On one level, we can read Francis's encyclical as a straightforward endorsement of the scientific consensus on all forms of environmental threats and their human causes. As a consequence of our actions, he declares,

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<sup>13</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

“the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”<sup>14</sup> We have plundered the earth’s resources, wiped out entire species, and undermined our delicate ecosystem. Our unquenchable appetite for fossil fuels and our cavalier use of our life-giving resources--the soil, plant life, and water--have led to an imperiling concentration of greenhouse gasses. This shortsighted behavior, the pope adds, has had a particularly devastating impact on the health and well-being of the world’s poorest peoples.

However, there is an important difference between Francis’s arguments in *Laudato Si’* and the findings of scientists, such as those on the UN Panel on Climate Change, about the threat to our natural environment. Whereas the UN’s experts are limited to assessing the damaging effects of human behavior, Francis has the advantage of addressing this threat in terms of a more profound question---man’s relationship with God. Thus, in the encyclical, he goes beyond the scientists to attribute global warming to a misguided anthropology that has encouraged human beings to put themselves, and not God, at the center of the universe. Thanks to a distorted understanding of God’s injunction to exercise “dominion” over the earth, Francis argues, man has fostered a “cult of unlimited human power . . . which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s immediate interests.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, he emphasizes, God did not encourage “the unbridled exploitation of nature” or of other living creatures. Quite the

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<sup>14</sup> Paragraph 21.

<sup>15</sup> Paragraph 121. Here the Pope Francis refers to his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013): at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

contrary. By virtue of the fact that the earth was created before him, Francis advises his readers, man is obliged to treat the earth in a manner that is “caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving.”<sup>16</sup>

With these words in mind, I shall now return to my argument about the modern Catholic university’s unique position in an era of “post truth.” If I may extrapolate from Francis’s appeal for responsible stewardship of our planet, the pope might say that the role of the Catholic university is not merely to identify a given problem or recommend a possible solution, as a scientist or policymaker might do. Beyond this function, it should provide its scholars with an intellectual environment that encourages them to pose questions and provide answers about human responsibility that is unavailable to their secular peers. This perspective has a notable implication for our response to global climate change. In this case, we should not only continue to foster world-class research on the manifold dangers facing the earth. Even more important, we should recognize that we are morally obliged to seek to convince others about the truth of these perils and the necessity of altering our behavior to reduce them.

Will this perspective be sufficient to persuade even Catholic climate-change skeptics of the need to think and act differently? These are difficult times for optimists. Human beings have a poor record of recognizing and responding to their mistakes until the consequences of their actions engulf them.<sup>17</sup> Still, the modern Catholic university represents a source of hope.

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<sup>16</sup> Paragraphs 16 and 116.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, an emerging concern is that our resistance to changing our minds may be neurologically determined. See Jonathan T. Kaplan and Sarah I. Gimbel, “Neural correlates of

As educators, our mission is simple. We are called to teach our students about the world as it really is and then to use our special platform to persuade them to tend to its well-being as if it were one of their most pressing responsibilities.

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maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence," *Scientific Reports*, vol. 6, article number 39589 (December 23, 2016).

