

Title: Matthew H. Goldberg, From Christian Identity to Climate Action
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Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Transcript

Chris Martin: I'm talking to social psychologist Matt Goldberg today. He is the first author of a new article called A Social Identity Approach to Engaging Christians in the Issue of Climate Change. His paper touches on religion, social psychology and climate action and it's about how to craft messages that encourage Christians to think of climate change as a religious issue and a moral issue. It's also about the psychology behind why those messages work.

Matt works at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. After we talk about his recent paper, we will talk about the work that this program does and about online resources that are useful for educators.

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Chris Martin: We are here to talk about 2019 paper. Before we get to that paper, this is part of a series of papers on climate change and communication that you've done. So what is the crux of this issue?

Matthew Goldberg: So climate change is such a pervasive issue. It's a national security issue. It's a food issue. It's a pollution issue. And so at our Research Center at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, one of our main goals is to build public will in the American public to take action on climate change. So this is one of our many studies in which we are testing various messages or different messengers or different message frames in influencing people to take action.

Chris Martin: And this is a set of two studies in this paper. So we will start by study one. What motivated that study and what did you do there?

Matthew Goldberg: So this comes out of our climate change in the American mind surveys that we conduct twice a year since 2008. And we saw Christians as an untapped audience and because they take up 70% of the population and have a huge influence on our politics, we saw them as largely untapped because there aren't clear religious messengers out there that people could easily bring to mind. And so we saw that as a large opportunity.

So in this study, we usually ask all the different kinds of attitude measures, belief measures, and policy preferences. And one of the questions we are asking is, which of the following reasons to reduce global warming if any are most important to you? And the people could select up to three reasons. And we created this long list that included items like provide a better life for our children and grandchildren, improve people's health, protect God's creation, is the one that we are interested in. And of the three selected, people then choose their most important reason.

And so I was interested in this because I went into this study looking at, well, are there religious or moral angles to this issue that we can tap into to engage Christians in the issue of climate change?

So in this exploratory study, we found that of the people that chose an answer, 19 percent of Christians chose protect God's creation as their single most important reason compared to only 6 percent of non-Christians. So in statistical terms, nearly four times the odds of choosing that as their most important option for Christians compared to non-Christians. So we saw that as really promising to move forward.

Chris Martin: Of the non-Christians in the study, do you know what percentage were atheists and agnostic?

Matthew Goldberg: I do have that in the paper. So the sample is nationally representative so they would pretty closely mirror the US population.

Chris Martin: OK. Well, more broadly, so you had a pretty large percentage of Jewish and Muslim respondents too, correct?

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah.

Chris Martin: I mean corresponding to the national population.

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. So still not huge considering they're not huge parts of the country. Well, translating it into a sample of around 2500 people, still not a big enough sample size to feel very confident in the results but certainly, we had enough to take a look.

Chris Martin: OK.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah, I was just taking a look at the paper to see if we had broken it down. It's just – we just had Christian versus non-Christian. So yeah, I can't break it down further.

Chris Martin: OK.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. So it being four times the odds of Christians choosing protect God's creation as their single most important reason to reduce global warming, we saw that as promising especially because we rarely hear in the media or any kind of climate change communicators taking a religious or moral stance. There are some very prominent ones but not in the mainstream. So we saw that as a big motivation to keep going to see if we could develop a message of our own to see if there's a causal relationship there.

Chris Martin: And in study two, that's where you actually looked at the causal relationship and you did a manipulation. So you also studied the mediators. Some of our listeners may know what a mediator is, some may not. It's a mechanism. So talk about study two.

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. So we went into this trying to one, test the causal relationship and two, like you said, use mediation analysis to try and pull apart what drives the messages effectiveness. So we could that a message is effective but we want to know what makes it effective. And it's hard to pull apart in any individual study whether the message itself was effective or the general concept can be generalized to other kinds of messages. And we hope that it's the latter but of course it's always difficult to know within an individual study.

So we went into this study. We initially did an exploratory version of it and then it was very promising. And then we just replicated it with identical materials. So in the paper, we present the combined results.

So to get at the mediators, we designed the message to specifically tap into those. So we have three hypotheses that were derived in the literature and also from our focus group conversations between all the authors. So we focused on religious appeals, so their religious identity, moral appeals whether something is right or wrong, and normative appeals whether other Christians believe similarly.

Chris Martin: On the religious identity, the second author of your paper is an Evangelical Christian and he helped with that part, correct?

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. He had grown up in an evangelical household and he was able to test the message to his family and it was super helpful because you don't want – because you are walking this fine line of potentially pandering versus hitting the right chord. So we were able to test this with family members and he was incredibly helpful. We are talking about Abel Gustafson [0:07:16]. He was crucial in executing these studies.

So yeah, we developed this message and we also had an additional manipulation that didn't end up showing any differences in which we swapped out global warming for environmental protection because there are some works showing that even mentioning global warming will make people shy away from the message especially if they have a skeptical view of it. But surprisingly, the message worked similarly regardless of whether we use environmental protection or global warming. So that's promising for the success of the message.

So we eventually collapsed across those two treatments because they didn't show any difference. And so we compare that to a controlled condition and we examined whether the message moved the mediators. So whether people saw climate change as a religious issue, as a moral issue, or an issue that other Christians care about.

Chris Martin: Before we jump to the mediators, I would like to mention the treatment you used which based on the parable of the talents and this is a parable told by Jesus, it's in the gospel's and it's a story of a master who gives talents to various servants, some of them do nothing with those talents, some of them use their talents wisely. And when the master returns, he praises the ones who use them wisely and condemns those who did not.

And based on that, you developed this passage, this experimental treatment which is a verbal passage that participants read. And I'm just going to read this out so listeners can understand what this says.

“Man was created in God’s image which separates humans from the rest of creation.” Genesis 1:26-27.

Psalms 139:13-16, “But this unique status includes a special responsibility. God made humans responsible for taking care of his creation.”

For example the Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25 teaches us that when God entrusts things to us, He wants us to nourish and care for them, not ignore or degrade them. As Christians, it is our responsibility to be good stewards of God’s creation.

God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden, Genesis 2:15. We can use nature for our benefit but it is not OK to destroy God’s garden that he entrusted to us.

As a Christian, this makes sense to me and I know that others feel the same. In a recent national poll, Americans identified their top reasons why they personally want to reduce threats to the environment. One of the top reasons was to protect God’s creation. While people across the world are carelessly degrading and poisoning what God has created, many Christians are taking notice and taking action.

I believe it is my moral duty to do what I can to care for God’s creation and I hope you feel the same.

That’s the end of the passage. And after they read this or one of the other conditions, you measured both mediators which are intermediary variables and outcomes and when it comes to the mediators, the intermediate effects, you looked at whether the treatment induced people to frame environmental protection as a religious issue, a moral issue, or a normative issue, and you found changes there, correct?

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah, across all three. So religious framing, so did they see climate as a religious issue? Actually, we framed it here as environmental protection and asked about climate change later. So is environmental protection a religious issue? Is it a moral issue? And the last one being normative, do other Christians believe the same?

Chris Martin: And do we know to what extent these are different from a pre-test based on prior studies?

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. So we did conduct a pre-test so we were able to tap into their existing beliefs and control for those. So that certainly helped both statistically and also trying to pull apart, which part of the spectrum people are moving like are they going from uncertain to certain versus oppositional. So that’s certainly helpful for us. And there are still a lot of data for us to dig into.

But there isn't a lot of topline numbers in public opinion of the extent to which people view climate change as a religious and moral issue. We've done some of the work at our center especially when Pope Francis was in the US giving a lot of speeches about the issue. But we are certainly due for an update and an expansion of the topic.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Your Pope Francis study showed right after his encyclical about climate change as both a political – sorry, as both a religious and moral issue. There were one out of six Americans and one out of three American Catholics said that that message influenced their views.

Matthew Goldberg: So incredibly important because he is such a trusted messenger among Catholics.

Chris Martin: So an effect of the mediators, now let's talk about the effect from the mediators to the ultimate outcomes. The ultimate outcomes were more specific attitudes. So talk about what you found there.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. So there are a few that we measured that I think are important in our public discourse about climate change, so the first one being what's more important to prioritize, protecting the environment or economic growth? So that tension is often framed although I don't think it's the correct tension to frame the public debate but it's often used. So I throw those in for outcome to use. So that was one.

Another one was tapping into something more related to the message, whether it's our right to use the earth as we wish or it's our responsibility to protect it.

The next one was issue priority. And this is important because we might be able to use people – to move people's attitudes but if the issue isn't a priority, they are not going to vote on it or act on it. So we asked people the extent to which environmental protection was an issue priority.

And another one was are they willing to join the campaign to convince elected officials to take action to protect the environment. And again, this is tapping into behavioral measure is so important in tracking the public.

And then – so those were all asked pre and post message but we didn't want to potentially prime people with their climate change attitudes. So we didn't ask those questions until after the message. So is global warming happening, is it human caused and are you worried about it, were asked only after the message.

Chris Martin: However, the degree to which they say global warming was a problem was significantly higher than what the average American would say after this treatment, correct?

Matthew Goldberg: Yes.

Chris Martin: So what does this suggest about how messages about global warming can compel Christians to take it more seriously? Now presumably, there's already a segment of Christians in the US that does take it very seriously but the ones who don't because at the Yale Center for the study of climate change, you can't just waltz into a church and decide to give the homily that Sunday because you know this message works. So how does this translate into a real message?

Matthew Goldberg: So one is raising prominent voices that already exist. So, one of the most inspirational climate messengers that I know of is Katharine Hayhoe. She is a professor at Texas A&M. She is a climate scientist and an evangelical Christian. So extremely effective at tapping into that identity but also has the expertise to back it up. So we need to raise those messengers up and make them more a part of the mainstream because people are – they are paying attention to the media and largely unconsciously thinking about how much they see themselves in the speaker. And if they don't see anyone like them or that shares their values then it's harder for them to move on the issue particularly if there's a counter weight that's pulling them in the other direction.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean we do know there are some evangelical Christian leaders like Jerry Falwell Jr. who have closed ties to the Republican Party and are unlikely to push the issue of climate change. So do we know whether leaders like that have an influence in the opposite direction?

Matthew Goldberg: I suspect they do. I haven't seen any scientific work on it. But certainly, I suspect that these ideas apply in the other direction if someone who is doubtful or even dismissive about climate change is someone you look up to and whose political and religious views you respect then it can do some real damage. And we have definitely seen that.

Chris Martin: Now, a lot of our listeners are familiar with Moral Foundations Theory, Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham's Moral Foundations Theory, and some of them might be familiar with the work on leveraging purity and sanctity to get people to get people to care about climate change. So talk about how this approach that you are taking is a bit different from that.

Matthew Goldberg: So one, there has already been some work on Moral Foundations Theory and connecting it to environmental protection and inspiring better engagement particularly among conservatives. So a very good framework that influences our work and certainly I wouldn't put it below or above our approach, it will be just different. We took a social identity approach because we saw it as more flexible. So we think a lot about identity both applying to people's core values but also things that they do and care about. So whether people fish and hunt sometimes are core to their identity.

And moral foundations could be used to message about those topics but appealing to their identity is something that we saw as more flexible. So we wanted to be able to scale up these messages to both other Christians but also other religious audience. And so, that's why we took that approach.

Chris Martin: And by identity, you are saying by definition, someone with your identity? So someone with your role, your religious role as a Christian or your hobbyist role as a fisherman or a hunter, by definition that includes caring for the earth?

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. And that's something that we are trying to do with our messages where we built it in as something inherent in it. Sometimes it's not so obvious and sometimes there's a clear connection there where like for fisherman, we can make that connection for them if they are not already seeing it.

Chris Martin: So are there other people at your center who are specifically doing work on hunters and fishermen or other identities of that sort right now?

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. We have a paper under review now and this is led by Abel Gustafson where we tested a message by a fisherman named Richard Mode. This came out of our – so we also have a radio program called The Yale Climate Connections, and one of the stories is about Richard Mode, a fisherman who is expressing his sadness for not being able to fish the way he did with I think his grandfather and he is seeing the fish disappear before his eyes year after year.

And we initially tested this message a couple of years ago and then we did a replication and extension of it this year and the paper Abel is leading, it lays out all the different reasons of why this is potentially an effective message. One, because it harnesses the effective emotion so people feel compassion for Richard Mode and an identification with him but it also makes people worried about the issue because it taps into some important information about fishing.

So I think that's a promising strategy. It's hard for us to know how much of that – of the message was driven by people's identification as a fisherman. We did test for that. It didn't appear to move the results. But he is someone that is relatable so it's – that can largely be driving it.

Chris Martin: And another area where you do research, this is stepping away from your 2019 paper that we just talked about, is about how talking to your family and friends about climate change can affect their attitudes and sometimes taken out of context. This can seem silly because how much impact can that really have. The comedian, Nate Bargatze, has a whole bit in his latest Netflix special about how when you take that bit out of context seems kind of funny.

But your work, your empirical work, shows that that's actually quite effective and you've got another 2019 paper on that. So talk about that.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. So this is part of two papers where we focus on the norms and beliefs of friends and family. And the reason why I've been focusing on this is because we focus a lot on messengers and the trust in them and their credibility is massively influential as to whether their messages are effective. And I want to focus on the most important messengers, which are friends and family. People find them to be most influential and I have a background in relationship science. My former doctoral adviser, Cheryl Carmichael is a researcher in close relationships. So I have come into this area of research focusing on constructs like closeness and

the inclusion of the other in-self in which you feel your self-identity merging with close others around you.

So I had that frame of mind going into this research and expecting that friends and family are the most important messengers about typically any issue. So in our first 2019 paper published in *Environment and Behavior*, we looked at whether liberals and conservatives differ on climate change public opinion and how much those differences vanished when we looked at people with high social norm, pro-environmental social norms. And we found that the effects were really big. So that inspired us to look further at our data.

And another study in which we looked at a panel data set in which participants were surveyed seven months apart. And we tracked how much they discussed the issue with friends and family and lined it up with their change and climate change beliefs.

A lot of the previous work on this issue focuses on the scientific consensus as being a very effective message for engaging people on the issue of climate change. And it's so effective because it's simple, it's easy to tell someone, and it's highly credible.

So we looked at the changes in beliefs about the scientific consensus as a lag behind the discussion with close friends and family in this 2-time point design. And we found that it significantly moved people and had some indirect effects on key climate change beliefs like the belief that it's happening, that it's human-caused and worry about it.

Chris Martin: And when you start a conversation with a family member or when you start a conversation with a friend, you kind of anticipate how it's going to go before you start. So you probably know whether they are going to be somewhat receptive or somewhat indifferent or even hostile. Do we have any data showing that people are mainly starting conversations with people who are already a little sympathetic or maybe just indifferent?

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. So our studies don't speak to that but it's certainly suggestive that people must be speaking to people that are at least somewhat receptive. There's some other work on defensiveness that I have investigated in my work where you want to first affirm people's core beliefs before you hit them with something that they might be defensive about. I think Katharine Hayhoe is incredibly effective at this. I haven't seen my work extended to climate change although theoretically, it should work in which you want to establish some kind of respect and openness before you go into territory in which there might be some resistance. But certainly, people should be strategic in which family members and friends they speak to. I wouldn't suggest that you go and speak to everyone about it in the same way because people have different values and different starting points.

Chris Martin: What's an example of a conversational starter you could use if you are about to talk to someone who is probably already a little sympathetic but maybe a little skeptical?

Matthew Goldberg: So we recently tested a video of Katharine Hayhoe in which she debunks the – it's just the natural cycle explanation. So these are people – there's a large chunk of the

population that believes climate change is happening but they don't believe it's human-caused. And so she opens up the video with, "Well, first her expertise but then saying some people say the climate has always been changing. And you're right. It has always been changing. But this time, it's not for any of those reasons, volcanoes, the sun, or whatever."

And so I think that combo is really helpful where you first affirm like, "No, you're not stupid for thinking this. You might believe this for a variety of reasons. But here's the counter point." So I think that's a helpful strategy to generalize but certainly, I'm sure there are many others.

Chris Martin: So when it comes to talking to someone who is Christian and who is – for whom that identity is important, you could start for example with the Parable of Talents.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. I think that would be the way to go. I would love to. So speaking of future directions for our work on engaging Christians is to use these messages coming from a close friend or family member and especially if it's something that's easier to agree with. Like a lot of people agree that pollution is bad so it's something that's easy to get started on or that natural disasters are something that we should be ready for and to try to yeah, to be ready for.

But yeah, I think using the messages that we have shown in our experimental work to adapt them to regular conversation I think would be a great place to start and I think that's an awesome route for future research.

Chris Martin: Is there anything in Jewish scriptures that you might know off the top of your head that's similar?

Matthew Goldberg: I don't know. And my parents probably aren't going to be proud that I don't know.

Chris Martin: OK.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah.

Chris Martin: So you recently tweeted about a new paper, Linda Skitka is the first author on that paper. She does a lot of work on moral and political psychology. And you found that insightful and separating how morals are different from religious identities. So tell me about why you found that paper insightful.

Matthew Goldberg: Yeah. One, the methods were fantastic. They pretty much emptied their file drawer of all the different studies they have done on it. So they had a large sample and very precise estimates. So I love that. They tested a bunch of different hypotheses. I can't recall all of them. But the main one being, are religious convictions and moral convictions the same thing? And it's just something that we had discussed during the design of our experiment. And we eventually decided to measure both of them because we realized that they are not the same thing.

And what Skitka and her colleagues found is that they are largely independent constructs where religious convictions are more rooted in like a respect for authority. So I would wrap in social identity there. So if you're Christian, that's part of your religious identity. That doesn't necessarily guide you as to what's right and wrong because sometimes it's just following the group or because of normative pressures. But moral convictions are more about what's right and wrong and they don't draw on Haidt's work there but it's kind of implicit in which it's about care and harm but also right and wrong is built into feelings of impurity and sanctity.

Chris Martin: So now, let's talk about the Yale Center where you're employed. You're one of many people doing research there and one of the things you do is provide resources to educators both school level and higher education level. So talk about some of the resources that people can find on your website.

Matthew Goldberg: Yes. So the website is ClimateCommunication.Yale.edu. So one of the most useful resources there is the Yale Climate Opinion Maps, so that's where we use downscaling techniques in which we collect a lot of data in order to estimate people's public opinion across the US all the way down to the congressional district. And that's incredibly useful to get to legislators, to advocates, and to educators to show the diversity of public opinion in the US and how heterogeneous we really are. And even just congressional districts that are next to each other or going from state to state, you could see really big shifts. And they speak to potential cultural effects for effects from elite cues depending on who is in office.

So I think that's an incredibly useful resource just for understanding where the best places to target are for a campaign or for a messaging strategy.

Another set of resources that I think will be incredibly useful to the public or to educators is we recently released ten years of data from our Climate Change: The American Mind Survey. So that data is publicly available on the open science framework. You could probably get to it from our website or through OSF directly. And we also have a paper written about it.

But a really awesome thing that our team developed is this data explorer tool through Tableau in which you could just select. It's a point and click and it gives you these beautiful visualizations of climate change public opinion over time by different demographics; age, race, or political ideology. And it's incredibly useful particularly for I would say for methods, classes, or statistics classes.

Chris Martin: I'll definitely include a link to that on our show notes and our website and our tweets about this episode. So thank you for joining us. It has been great talking to you.

Matthew Goldberg: Thanks so much for having me on.

Chris Martin: My next guest on the show is Sheila Heen. She is the founder of Triad Consulting Group and she is a lecturer on law at Harvard Law School. She is also the co-author of *Difficult Conversations*.

And thanks for the feedback more recently. As always, you can reach me at @ChrisMartin76 on Twitter and by email at Podcast@HeterodoxAcademy.org.

If you have time, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show. Thank you for listening.

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