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Big Oil and Climate Change Denial

Abstract

"One of the Alliance's most basic commitments is to free market economic development fueled by coal and oil that will, as they see it, lift the poor out of poverty."

Posting about the philosophy of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/big-oil-and-climate-change-denial/>

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in things

October 18, 2018

David Schelhaas

Big Oil and Climate Change Denial

I will continue the discussion from my [previous article](#) with a brief personal anecdote. During the 1990s, I was team-teaching a college class informally known as Environmental English, a writing course funded by a grant from The Pew Foundation through the Christian College Coalition. One of my team members was a biology professor, and from time to time he would show me something written in denial of the dangers of climate change by a man named E. Calvin Beisner. “The man has no scientific credentials,” he would fume. “He has a doctorate in something like Scottish history, but he sets himself up as an expert in climate science.” Today Beisner is the founder and author of most of the theological/scientific/economic positions of the Cornwall Alliance.[1](#)

In a recent statement The Cornwall Alliance calls the climate change movement “a false religion” and “one of the greatest deceptions of our day.” Here’s are some “scientific” pronouncements from their website:

1. “We believe Earth and its ecosystems—created by God’s intelligent design and infinite power and sustained by His faithful providence—are robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting, admirably suited for human flourishing, and displaying His glory. Earth’s climate system is no exception. Recent global warming is one of many natural cycles of warming and cooling in geologic history.” **To this, my biology professor friend says, “Rubbish. Ecosystems are ‘robust and resilient’ only if they are not damaged and stressed beyond carrying capacity.”**

2. We deny that Earth and its biological systems are fragile. **This is denial that is made out of ignorance or willful self-deception. Here is perhaps the best known recent example of a fragile ecosystem: The life cycles of many species of birds were so compromised by DDT in the 1960's that except for the work of Rachel Carson, a significant number of bird species would have disappeared.**
3. We deny that carbon dioxide—essential to all plant growth—is a pollutant. Reduction of greenhouse gases cannot achieve significant reductions in future global temperatures, and the costs of the policies would far exceed the benefits. **My friend the scientist replies, “Water is also ‘essential to life’ but it is deadly if too much is in your lungs. That CO2 is potentially a pollutant is attested to by the fact that heart and breathing rate rise if CO2 gets in the blood stream.”**

Beisner has a long history of involvement in conservative, anti-climate change organizations. He is a policy adviser for the Heritage Foundation and works closely with the Heartland Institute as well—both conservative think tanks. According to Brendan O'Connor writing in the online magazine *Splinter*, these organizations, along with The Cornwall Alliance, “set the terms for the conversation—evangelical and otherwise—about the climate.” O'Connor continues, “Members of the Cornwall Alliance and their ilk are not simply theoreticians but enforcers, stifling dissent in the wider American evangelical community, smothering environmentalist tendencies before they gain a following.”[2](#)

What O'Connor is suggesting here is that the activities of The Cornwall Alliance create a sort of trickle-down effect. People like Beisner talk to political leaders, pastors, and leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), and they in turn become the conduits of climate change denial to local church congregations and Christian schools. (I should note that the NAE went through a fairly dramatic battle on the issue of climate change in 2006, acknowledging the reality of climate change and even issuing a “Call to Action.” But this calling was soon squelched, and it was not until 2015 that the NAE came out in favor of climate action.)

The Cornwall Alliance also carries its message to Congress. The most vocal opponent of climate change policies in the U. S. Senate is Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma. At the heart of his disparagement of climate change concern is an argument he has taken almost directly out of the Cornwall Alliance economic/theological playbook. Inhofe states that the existing and proposed

climate change policies “put millions of the world’s poor at risk by promoting policies to fight the alleged problem of global warming that will slow economic development, and condemn the poor to more generations of grinding poverty and high rates of disease and early death” (O’ Connor). Of course, virtually all climate scientists would say the opposite, asserting that it is climate change brought about by fossil fuel consumption that will bring about grinding poverty.

It ought to be noticed that Oklahoma is an oil state and that action taken to fight climate change is action against the production and use of fossil fuels. As I have already noted, a cursory reading of the Cornwall website reveals that one of the Alliance’s most basic commitments is to free market economic development fueled by coal and oil that will, as they see it, lift the poor out of poverty.

In an article titled “How Fossil Fuel Money Made Climate Denial the Word of God,” Brendan O’Connor writes about the role the fossil fuel industry plays in promoting climate change denial, but he also acknowledges the difficulty of proving this:

[T]he Cornwall Alliance is in fact a project of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit called the James Partnership, run by Chris Rogers, of CDR Communications, a Virginia-based consulting firm. The James Partnership, financial records show, is embedded in the very same world of shadowy corporate political spending as Heritage and Heartland.

I have come upon several assertions that organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Heartland Institute, and the Cornwall Alliance are all financed by secret money—much of which comes from oil companies. However, it is difficult to prove this since corporate donations are often channeled through many different donor groups.

Nevertheless, the Cornwall Alliance’s commitment to increasing fossil fuel consumption is blatant, and though it was made under the guise of a Christian commitment to the poor, it denies all scientific research that reveals the negative effects of fossil fuel consumption. But by embedding their commitment to the fossil fuel industry in a net of pious-sounding God-talk, they are promoting great damage to the world which God loves and to whom he gave the significant task of caring for it.

This prayer from their website captures the central concerns of The Cornwall Alliance:

Dear Father in Heaven, we pray that trade and business across the globe would flourish. We pray for the leaders of the countries and various international institutions who decide economic policy. Please give them wisdom and let them uphold an economic system that is not restrictive.

We also pray for an abundance of energy that will support the growing economies of the world.

We ask You to help people understand the importance of conventional energy sources like coal and nuclear to the developing nations of the world. Lord, let your wisdom guide the decision makers in academia and governmental institutions.

This sounds like a prayer written to please the fossil fuel industry rather than a serious petition directed to Almighty God. How sad it would be if Christians who subscribe to the ideas of The Cornwall Alliance are, in fact, subscribing to ideas generated to please and promote the fossil fuel industry.

FOOTNOTES

1. All quotations attributed to The Cornwall Alliance come from their website:
cornwallalliance.org
2. O'Connor, Brendan. "How Fossil Fuel Money Made Climate Denial the Word of God." *Splinter*, August 8, 2017.