

The Pope, Global Warming and the Elusive Meaning of Morality



A while back I was on the O'Reilly Factor talking about the liberal idea of raising taxes on the rich. Bill brought the Bible into the conversation, referring to the passage about how it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a

needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

I said, "I don't care what the Bible says," referring specifically to the tax debate. I received a ton of very angry emails for that remark from the faithful in Bill's audience. The general message was, "You better care what the Bible says – or face the consequences."

I wrote back to some saying if you're so concerned about the teachings in the Bible why don't you pay more attention to the part about not judging lest ye be judged. Let's just say while I thought that was a good comeback, they didn't. And let's also say, it's a good thing I don't believe in Hell.

In any case, I now have second thoughts about my "I don't care what the Bible says" comment. Unfortunately, my second thoughts are exactly the same as my first thoughts. I still don't care.

I bring this up now because the Pope has just issued an encyclical, or teaching document, on global warming. Here's how the New York Times trumpeted the news:

"Pope Francis on Thursday called for a radical transformation

of politics, economics and individual lifestyles to confront environmental degradation and climate change, blending a biting critique of consumerism and irresponsible development with a plea for swift and unified global action. ...

“The most vulnerable victims, he declares, are the world’s poorest people, who are being dislocated and disregarded.”

Since a papal encyclical is one of the strongest statements that can be made by the Catholic Church, this is a big deal.

Not to me, but I’m pretty sure Francis won’t lose any sleep over my indifference. To paraphrase my sage remark to O’Reilly on taxes: I don’t care what the Pope says on global warming.

First, the Catholic Church has a spotty record when it comes to pronouncements on science. Can you say, Galileo? You remember him, one of the greatest scientists the world has ever produced; the “heretic” who had the gall to say the planet Earth was not at the center of the universe; and for that was brought up on charges by the Catholic Church and sentenced to spend the rest of his life under house arrest.

That Galileo.

And has the pope taken into account the probability that energy costs will go up, not down, if we do what he and other liberals want us to do to combat climate change or global warming or whatever they’re calling it this week? How’s that going to help the poor? What’s the pope going to say when poor people freeze in the winter because they can’t afford their higher energy bills? Blaming their plight on the evils of capitalism might make liberals feel better but it won’t make the poor any warmer.

For the record, I’m not saying humans aren’t at least partially responsible for climate change – if the climate is actually changing. What I’m saying is I’m not buying the doomsday scenario that true believers like Al Gore have been

peddling. And I don't need a pope, who is not a climate expert, throwing his substantial weight around trying to influence government policies.

On this, I'm with Jeb Bush who told a campaign rally in New Hampshire that, "I hope I'm not going to get castigated for saying this by my priest back home, but I don't get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinals or my pope. ... I think religion ought to be about making us better as people and less about things that end up getting in the political realm."

According to the Times, "Francis has made it clear that he hopes the encyclical will influence energy and economic policy and stir a global movement. He calls on ordinary people to press politicians for change. Catholic bishops and priests around the world are expected to discuss the encyclical in services on Sunday. But Francis is also reaching for a wider audience, asking in the document 'to address every person living on this planet.'

"Even before the encyclical, the pope's stance against environmental destruction and his demand for global action had already thrilled many scientists. Advocates of policies to combat climate change have said they hoped that Francis could lend a 'moral dimension' to the debate."

This is the position of many liberals in America. They also see climate change not only as a political issue but one of morality too. And they too applaud the pope for making the connection between politics and moral values.

One might argue that the church should stay out of debates about zoning laws or the speed limit in Wyoming. But how can religious leaders stay silent when the issues involve fundamental questions of morality?

The Times quotes Vincent Miller, a scholar at the University of Dayton, who says, "Critics will say the church can't teach policy, the church can't teach politics. And Francis is

saying, 'No, these things are at the core of the church's teaching.' "

Liberals will love that message too. But here comes the uh oh alert. This was also in the encyclical on global warming: "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?"

I'm guessing liberals weren't too happy with that part. But abortion is also a moral issue at the core of the church's teaching. And so is gay marriage – and to some extent, so is the sex change of the former Bruce Jenner.

So let's review, members of the congregation: Liberals embrace the pope when he speaks out against things they're also against – like global warming – but they want the church to mind its own business when its leaders speak out against things they support – like abortion and gay marriage.

But if this picking and choosing seems like a morality of convenience on the part of liberals, conservatives are no different and no better. Religious conservatives may not like it when the pope speaks out about global warming, but they love it when he and other church leaders speak out against abortion and gay marriage.

Morality, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder.

God help us, so to speak.

