

Statement on Energy and Climate Change
following the
Fifty-sixth Annual Summer Conference sponsored by the Institute on
Religion in an Age of Science (July 24-31, 2010) concerning
The Energy Transition: Religious and Cultural Perspectives

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Preamble

Energy and climate change have typically been discussed in terms of their associated science, technology, economics and politics. Recently, more attention has been given to fundamental religious and ethical questions surrounding the inevitable shift from fossil to renewable energies. As for any technological transition of this magnitude, ultimate success will require consideration of ethics and religion as well as of science and technology. Religious perspectives also possess the unique advantage of highlighting ultimate values, regardless of economic and political pressures. For these reasons, the time has come for theologians and ethicists to join with scientists and engineers in promoting a sustainable energy future. The following petition and call to action reflects this approach, as developed through our conference deliberations.

Petition

Whereas solving global issues of energy availability and climate change within the next generation will require unprecedented levels of commitment and sacrifice by governmental and social institutions;

Whereas peak oil and global warming will disproportionately affect the most economically vulnerable members of our global community;

Whereas many ecosystems will suffer from large-scale disruptions which could displace species and force ecological change at a far greater than natural rate;

Whereas religious and ethical institutions are uniquely capable of addressing such contentious intergenerational challenges; and

Whereas only cooperative efforts among the scientific, technical, ethical and religious communities can forge the moral leadership needed to achieve workable solutions on difficult energy issues;

We claim that the time has come to recognize that:

1. All people have a right to sufficient energy for sustaining life, health and work;
2. Basic energy needs account for a significantly greater percentage of living costs for the poor as compared to the rich;
3. The majority of environmental refugees arising from climate change are currently and will continue to be the global poor;
4. Rich nations can reduce their per capita energy consumption by 50% with little or no loss in quality of life by decreasing energy use, increasing energy efficiency and investing in renewable energy;
5. A modest doubling in per capita energy consumption can dramatically improve the quality of life for the poorest 25% of people across the Earth;
6. Alternative fuels must be developed to replace oil for transportation so as to avoid the onset of substantial economic dislocations associated with peak oil and climate change;

7. The preferred liquid fuels are those that are carbon-neutral and can be generated from non-food biomass, such as agricultural residues, vegetable oils, algae, switchgrass and waste wood products;
8. A strong market for cellulosic ethanol requires removing limitations on the amount of ethanol that can be blended with gasoline and producing more vehicles able to run on high-ethanol fuels.
9. Energy efficiency and a wide range of renewable energy technologies (e.g., wind, solar, hydroelectric, biogas, geothermal) can provide carbon-free electricity or even carbon-free transportation;
10. Safer technologies for nuclear power (e.g., modular gas-cooled designs, thorium fuel) should be considered, but only if reliable strategies are available for securing any high-level nuclear wastes;
11. Natural gas is a preferred transition fuel that can be used for transportation, heating buildings and manufacturing various products, while producing half the carbon emissions of coal;
12. There is no one-stop solution to the complexities of peak oil and climate change.

Call to Action

To meet basic energy rights for all people, especially the poor, efforts must be anchored in the traditional moral values of human communities, as promoted by the world's religions. These universal human values include loving all human beings, cherishing all forms of life, and fostering spiritual aspects of science and technology. On this basis, we call upon religious and spiritual leaders across the globe to cooperate with scientists and engineers in helping to find solutions to our common energy problems by:

- Educating the public on energy issues, particularly regarding climate change and peak oil;
- Encouraging reliable information from laity with scientific/technical expertise in energy;
- Recognizing that 60% of personal energy use arises from automobiles and home heating/cooling;
- Assessing energy options using moral norms – sufficiency, sustainability, participation and solidarity;
- Developing energy policies that reduce CO₂ while seeking energy security and economic vitality;
- Motivating personal and societal lifestyle changes needed to promote energy equity;
- Favoring energy prices that minimize both energy subsidies and market externalities;
- Working toward a pricing mechanism for carbon commensurate with its ecological impacts;
- Supporting federal tax rebates and municipal financing that foster energy conservation;
- Promoting energy-use displays that encourage consumers to reduce energy consumption;
- Advancing the construction of zero-energy buildings, whether residential or institutional; and
- Using faith-based facilities as model structures for reducing carbon footprint and energy costs.

For further information on the conference leading to this energy statement, see www.iras.org.

Endorsed by the conference presenters:

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