

Chapter 14. Religion, health and the environment.

WARNING: Quitting Religion Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health. Modified cigarette warning label

*God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green plant for food."*¹
The Bible

*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*² The Bible

Religionists believe that their god has given them dominion over the world. Further, they believe that upon death they will be given both a new place to live and a new body. These beliefs affect the way religionists treat their current homes and bodies. Many think they are entitled to defile their bodies and the environment because they believe they will get new ones when they die.

Environment.

Religionists are not shy about trying to contradict science with myth. Creationism is one example. Dealing with environmental issues a more dangerous example. Consider Congressman John Shimkus of Illinois, who testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment about carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in 2009 and quoted the Bible, saying, "The earth will end only when God declares it is time to be over. Man will not destroy this earth, this earth will not be destroyed by a flood . . . I do believe God's word is infallible, unchanging, perfect."³ Similarly, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, a possible future presidential candidate, speaking about god and energy policy, said, "Man is here not to serve Earth. The Earth is here for our benefit to serve us and it's a beautiful union and picture that God has given us with the Earth."⁴

Looking at anecdotal evidence, the vehicle I see most often displaying a Jesus fish is a large, four wheel drive SUV. Christians seem to feel entitled to drive large vehicles. Research supports this. A survey showed only 34% of white evangelical Protestants believe global warming is caused by human activity, and 31% of the same group thought there was no

evidence of global warming.⁵ Similarly, The Barna Group found that while 69% of atheists and agnostics are concerned about global warming, only 33% of evangelicals feel global warming is a major challenge.⁶

An article by James Sherk of the Evangel Society deals specifically with the link between religious belief, global warming and SUVs. Mr. Sherk says, “If . . . human CO2 emissions do not contribute to global warming, then the question ‘What Would Jesus Drive?’ becomes an utter absurdity, since then gas guzzling would . . . harm no one, and carpooling does nothing to help the earth or one’s fellow man. . . . [S]cientists have uncovered little reliable evidence to support the popular hype that surrounds global warming. As a result, Christians have no reason to fear contributing to global warming, and may drive any vehicle with a clear conscience.”⁷ Mr. Sherk’s analysis is short-sighted. Even if there were no such thing as global warming, the SUV takes more resources to build, consumes more of a finite resource, oil, and produces more pollution than an ordinary car.

The evangelical vehicle of choice is the SUV. The choice demonstrates their sense of entitlement and superiority. It is almost as if they are announcing “we are the chosen and we can do as we please, we are going to heaven and you are going to hell along with the garbage we produce along the way.” Religionists, who believe that the environment they despoil will be replaced by one pristine and new, are living a dangerous myth.

Religious scriptures written by men thousands of years ago cannot evolve to include modern scientific knowledge. People who maintain their scriptures are the “infallible, unchanging and perfect” word of god are more inclined to harm the environment. This myth affects both religionists’ treatment of the world and religionists’ treatment of their bodies.

Health.

How does the promise of a new body at death affect the way religionists treat their current bodies? I know I have only one body and one life, so I try to take care of it the best I can. I know a religionist who is so grossly obese that her life is threatened, yet she takes no steps to change her condition. Could it be that her belief she will get a new body is leading her to neglect the only body she will truly ever have?

The most religious state in the U.S., Mississippi, is also the most obese.⁸ Similarly, the second most religious state, Alabama is the second most obese.⁹ In fact, nine out of ten of the most religious states are also the most obese: Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Kentucky all fall within the top ten in the religiousness and obesity ratings (see the obesity/religiosity correlation chart on the following page). The least religious states rank lower in obesity.¹⁰ There is a startlingly clear relationship between religiosity and obesity. Whether there is a causal relationship warrants further examination, but obesity and religiosity are linked.

State	Religion Ranking	% who say religion important	Obesity Ranking	% Obese/ Overweight
Mississippi	1	85%	1	70.2%
Alabama	2	82%	2	68.1%
S. Carolina	3	80%	9	65.7%
Tennessee	4	79%	3	68.9%
Louisiana	5	78%	5	67.6%
Arkansas	6	78%	8	66.5%
N. Carolina	8	76%	10	65.3%
Oklahoma	9	75%	6	67.4%
Kentucky	10	74%	7	66.9%

A tragic answer to the question of how religion can affect health care is found in the regular newspaper reports of the way religionists subject innocent children to harmful beliefs about god and health. *Newsweek* reported about the following tragedy in Oregon:

Carl and Raylene Worthington told investigators they first noticed the bump on their daughter's neck when Ava was 3 months old. A doctor later said it was a benign cyst battling an infection in the child's blood; it continued to grow as she grew older. By the time little Ava reached 15 months, the bump measured three by four inches--the size of Clackamas County Deputy District Attorney Greg Horner's wallet, he told a jury in the Portland, Ore., suburb of Oregon City last week. By Feb. 29, 2008, Horner said, this "cystic hygroma," a congenital lymphatic lesion, was pressing up against the girl's windpipe, according to a ruling from the county's medical examiner. She was slowly choking to death.

Carl and Raylene called in the devoted parishioners of their Oregon City place of worship, the Followers of Christ, to seek God's help. They anointed Ava with oil. They fed her diluted wine. They extracted phlegm from her throat with the kind of suction bulb used to baste a Thanksgiving turkey. They laid their hands upon the toddler and prayed she would get better. What the Worthingtons did not do is call an ambulance.

The first physician ever to examine Ava was the Clackamas County coroner, who performed her autopsy. “Almost up until the end, if they had gotten her adequate medical treatment, they would have been able to help her,” Horner said during his opening statement.¹¹

In the end, the jury cleared the faith healing parents of manslaughter, allowing the mother to go free and convicting the father of a misdemeanor charge of criminal mistreatment.¹²

Horrifically, this is not the end of the story for the faith healing family in Oregon. Four months later, Raylene Worthington’s 16-year-old brother, a member of the same church, died of a treatable urinary tract infection. His parents went to trial for treating him with prayer instead of medicine. This time the jury came back with a conviction of both parents for negligent homicide.¹³

Oregon is an easier place to prosecute these cases because in 1999 the state eliminated a criminal law that provided an exemption from prosecution for faith healing.¹⁴ In Wisconsin, the legal situation is different. Wisconsin, like 30 other states,¹⁵ limits prosecution of parents who treat illness with prayer instead of medicine.

In Wisconsin, 11-year-old Madeline Kara Neumann died of otherwise treatable juvenile diabetes. Her parents, followers of an online group called Unleavened Bread Ministries, treated her with prayer instead of medicine.¹⁶ Despite a Wisconsin law that provides, “A person is not guilty of an offense . . . solely because he or she provides a child with treatment by spiritual means through prayer alone for healing in accordance with the religious method of healing . . . in lieu of medical or surgical treatment,” prosecutors charged the parents with reckless homicide.¹⁷ In this case, both parents were convicted in separate trials.¹⁸ The parents were sentenced to staggered 10 year terms of probation and staggered 30 day jail sentences so they could continue to care for their three surviving children whose medical welfare would be monitored by the court.¹⁹

The 30 states with laws protecting parents who treat children with prayer instead of medicine ignore the fact that a broad study found prayer has no positive effect on the health of heart patients. The \$2.4 million study was funded in large part by the pro-religion Templeton Foundation. Patients at six hospitals who received coronary artery bypass graft surgery were randomly assigned to three groups of about 600 each. Two groups were told they might or might not receive intercessory prayer, one of the two groups received the prayer, the other did not. The third group was told it would receive intercessory prayer and did. The group that did not receive prayer did the best, with 51% of the patients experiencing complications. Those who received prayer, but were not sure they did, came in second, with 52% experiencing complications. Those with the most complications, 59%, were patients who received prayer and knew it. The study concluded, “Intercessory prayer itself had no effect

on complication-free recovery from [bypass surgery], but certainty of receiving intercessory prayer was associated with a higher incidence of complications.”²⁰ The study offered no explanation for why the group that knew it was being prayed for did worse, other than it might be a result of chance. One coauthor of the study thought the group with knowledge of the prayers may have thought they were worse off than they were, and therefore got sicker.²¹ That is a pro-religious view. But there is an alternate explanation that has not been explored. If people thought they were sicker, they would probably take better care of themselves and have a better result. However, if they thought god was taking care of things, they may have been more lax in their care and had a worse result. All of the commentators looked for ways that religion could make patients healthier. None of the commentators allowed for the possibility (suggested by this study) that religious belief made the patients sicker.

Oddly, religious belief acts like a two-sided knife blade when it comes to health. In some cases religionists deny children health care that would keep them alive and in other cases they keep alive adults who would prefer to die. Think about the national furor over the Florida woman named Terri Schiavo. Ms. Schiavo unfortunately collapsed in her home in 1990 and ended up in a persistent vegetative state. A Florida court found that Ms. Schiavo was in a persistent vegetative state and she had made consistent and reliable statements that she would not want to be kept alive that way.²² As her court appointed guardian, her husband directed that her feeding tube be removed and she be allowed to die naturally. Ms. Schiavo’s Catholic parents objected to this order and began a tortured journey through the state and federal legal systems.

In more than 20 hearings, the courts upheld Mr. Schiavo’s decision, but the parents, backed by the religious right, continued to appeal. The Schiavo matter was adopted by the religious right and the “right to life” movement as an essential defense of their religious beliefs. When all state appeals were exhausted, the Florida Legislature gave Governor Jeb Bush authority to force Ms. Schiavo to remain on a feeding tube. When that law was held unconstitutional, the U.S. Congress acted in just three days to adopt a special law transferring jurisdiction of the matter from state court to federal court. The bill was supported by then Senator Barack Obama. President George W. Bush flew from Texas to Washington to sign the bill into law.

Unfortunately for the religionists that wished to force Ms. Schiavo to live against her wishes, the federal courts upheld Mr. Schiavo’s decision and allowed her to die. An autopsy showed that Ms. Schiavo had extensive brain damage and the claims that she had brain function, including shouting, “I want [to live],” as her parents’ attorney alleged, were false.²³ Reckless quantities of time, money and emotion were wasted trying to impose a religious value of life on a woman who wanted to die naturally. It is not enough that religionists invent a bearded man in the sky, claim to know his will and govern their lives by scriptures written by men and fixed in time. No, to validate their myths they try to force others to live like them. Religionists use power—like the guardianship over innocent children, and political power like passing special laws to keep Terry Schiavo alive against her will to justify and perpetuate

their myths. Religion is dangerous.

Religious lies—forcing children to die when they cannot yet make the choice to live, and forcing adults to live with artificial life support when they would want to die naturally, are harmful examples of how religion negatively impacts us all. Religion is not harmless, it is bad for your health and bad for the environment.

1. The Bible, Genesis 1:28-30.
2. The Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.
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4. “Congresswoman Michele Bachmann Talks Openly About Jesus and Policy,” Christian Broadcasting Network, December 4, 2009, <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2009/12/04/congresswoman-michele-bachmann-talks-openly-about-jesus-and-policy.aspx>
5. “Religious Groups’ Views on Global Warming,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 16, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=238>
6. “Born Again Christians Remain Skeptical, Divided About Global Warming,” Barna Group, September 17, 2007, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/20-donorscause/95-born-again-christians-remain-skeptical-divided-about-global-warming>
7. Sherk, James, “Christians and Climate Change: Should Followers of Christ Concern Themselves with the Threat of Global Warming?” Evangel Society, January 8, 2004, <http://www.evangelociety.org/sherk/wwjd.html>
8. “Mississippi is the fattest state for 5th straight year, Colorado still leanest,” CalorieLab (Utilizing Center for Disease Control statistics), July 28, 2010, <http://calorielab.com/news/2008/07/02/fattest-states-2008/>; “State of the States: Importance of Religion,” Gallup Polls, January 28, 2009, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/State-States-Importance-Religion.aspx#2>
9. Id.

10. The correlation is not as startling as with the most religious and most obese states, but the trend is still apparent. The environmental differences of Alaska (long winters, short days, cold weather) may in part explain why it has relatively high obesity despite low religiosity.

State	Religion Ranking	Obesity Ranking
Vermont	50	46
New Hampshire	49	34
Maine	48	29
Massachusetts	47	48
Alaska	46	24

11. "Trust in God," Newsweek, July 8, 2009,
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13. "Jury finds Beagleys guilty in faith-healing case," Clackamas Review, January 30, 2010
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14. "Child deaths test faith-healing exemptions," The Associated Press, November 23, 2008, reprinted at
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15. Id.

16. "Trials for Parents Who Chose Faith Over Medicine," The New York Times, January 20, 2009,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/21/us/21faith.html>

17. "Wisconsin's faith-healing law faces fresh scrutiny," Isthmus, March 26, 2008,
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18. "Dale & Leilani Neumann's Sentencing Tuesday," WSAW News, October 4, 2009
<http://www.wsaw.com/home/headlines/63477647.html>

19. "Dale and Leilani Neumann Sentenced To Spend Time In Jail, On Probation, and Serve Community Service," KASW News, October 6, 2009, <http://www.wsaw.com/karaneumann/headlines/63630282.html>
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22. Order of the Circuit Court of Pinellas County, February 11, 2000, <http://abstractappeal.com/schiavo/trialctorder02-00.pdf>
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