Research Review

The End of the World as We Know It Is Exactly What We Need

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Climate change demands new ways of knowing the world, beyond our core secular, state-centric beliefs

Source: Wes Warren via Unsplash.

Introduction

In Goodna, a suburb west of Brisbane, Australia, the world is ending. That may seem melodramatic, but for the residents of Enid Street, it is not as exaggerated as it sounds. Most of the houses in the neighborhood have been condemned and subsequently bought back from their owners by the state government following the devastating floods that hit South East Queensland in 2022. [1] The world as they have known it, in some cases for multiple generations, is ending. Houses where entire families were born, grew up, got married, had children, and died will soon be no more. Other families have been broken by the experience of losing their homes, with decades-long marriages coming to an end. The people, places, relationships, photographs, and belongings that make the world meaningful for us as humans are gone forever. The grief is palpable. New lives, new worlds must be

built out of this loss, this new climate-change-induced reality.[2]

> ***This is how the world ends, not in one cataclysmic Hollywood-esque explosion, meteorite hit, or mass flood, but in multiple smaller world-ending events that disrupt the fabric of our existence; causing us to feel out of place in spaces that were once familiar to us and now are strange; making us feel as though things are not as they should be, and never will be again.***

Such apocalyptic events are not unprecedented. Human beings have experienced floods, fires, wars, pandemics, and famines, at large and small scales, persistently throughout history. Out of the devastation of these events, humanity builds new realities that respond to the changed circumstances.

Yet the climate crisis seems different from other world-ending events of the past. It is not one event that affects one community. It is not one moment of destruction brought about by one powerful actor at the expense of the marginalized and oppressed, although these dynamics are undoubtedly part of the present moment. The climate crisis ends multiple worlds. Not only are our individual lives and worlds torn apart, as those in Enid Street, Goodna are experiencing, but the structures of governance, knowledge, leadership, and value that people built over time are also shattered. Where once these structures enabled parts of the world to rebuild after apocalyptic events, they are no longer up to this task.

The climate crisis, entangled as it is with other concurrent crises of democracy,[3] cost of living,[4] social relations[5] and more, reveals the inadequacy of several ontologies that we have inherited from or had forced on us by our nineteenth-century Enlightenment forebears. Even if we have moved into postsecular, postcolonial, and postmodern times, these modes of thinking critique rather than transcend dominant binary Enlightenment categories.[6] They struggle to escape the logic in which rationality reigns supreme; objectivity is not only possible but necessary; progress and growth are unquestionably good; "religion" can be clearly identified and neatly separated from the secular; and only that which is measurable, tangible, and observable counts as proper evidence. Humanity is superior to nature, and nature is endowed with all those characteristics associated with the categories of human that are deemed inferior (wild, untamed, irrational, female). Decoloniality, desecularization, and demodernization, in contrast with the "posts," are necessary first steps because they not only critique but demand the systematic dismantling of destructive ways of seeing the world. Yet these frameworks, too, only get us so far.

The outcomes of COP28 – the twenty-eighth United Nations Climate Change Conference held in 2023 – signal some shift in our overarching frameworks, due in no small measure to the contributions from critical postsecular, postmodern, decolonial scholars. An agreement to "transition away" from fossil fuels and the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund point to implicit acknowledgment (1) of the Developed World's historical responsibility for the injustice, and (2) that the most devastating impacts of climate change will be felt most immediately and acutely by those who have done the least to contribute to them. Yet for many representatives, lobbyists, and activists, the agreements did not go far enough. Loopholes remain so that growth can continue unabated at the expense of people and the planet.

In light of these developments, this piece explores what could (and maybe should) come next in the specific context of scholarship on religion, politics, and climate change, reviewing and drawing inspiration from scholars engaged in acts of future imagining. Specifically, we propose that this scholarship is pushing us to move beyond two shared core beliefs that are foundational to the knowledge and institutional structures currently shaping our collective life as a species: secularism and the state. The damaging consequences of consumer capitalism have been well-established across a diverse body of scholarship,[7] and so rather than rehearse these discussions again, we take for granted that this structure also needs to be overcome. The limitations of secularism and state-centric politics are, however, less well-known beyond the boundaries of critical religion and politics research. Yet these core beliefs limit our capacity to think and create new bodies of knowledge and ways of being in the world that are essential if we are to come to terms with our new climate change-impacted realities. Our scholarship, policy, leadership, and epistemologies but more fundamentally our ontologies, need to disconnect from these core beliefs and seek out new foundations more fitting for our worlds. Such fresh imagining is essential for the worlds we want to build out of the ones that are dying. Our critique draws on recent literature from the broad fields of climate change, international relations, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. Reviewing and engaging with this scholarship, we demonstrate how secularism and state centrism are conceptually problematic and have contributed to the climate crisis. We conclude by offering suggestions for how we might begin to imagine and, therefore, create more optimistic and just climate futures.

The Staying Power of Secularism

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Critical international relations and religious studies scholarship argues that secularism is one of modern politics' most important organizing principles, playing a vital role in shaping current forms of identity, power, and exclusion.[8] Despite the abundance of research that highlights the problems with secularist worldviews, the majority of research and policymaking is still largely wedded to thinking about the world through the seemingly distinct and delineated categories of the religious and the secular. Indigenous spiritualities, environmentalist and naturist worldviews, progressive "green" theologies, and conservative anthropocentric theologies are all lumped together under the term *religion*. Such intellectual reductionism obscures the complex landscape of existential realities that populate our sociopolitical terrains. It also deprives us of invaluable creative resources for approaching the problems we face and the possibility of (re)imagining potential responses and solutions.

For example, Indigenous spiritualities have been either dismissed as premodern, backward, uncivilized ways of understanding the world or romanticized and idealized in tokenistic and patronizing ways. In both treatments, Indigenous spiritualities are homogenized and marginalized, not taken seriously as forms of knowledge and ways of being that are at least as legitimate as modern secular scientific counterparts. The damage done to Indigenous Peoples due to this treatment is not simply a matter of inequality and injustice. For many of the Indigenous nations that inhabit the Australian continent, for example, their ongoing separation and dislocation from ancestral lands as a result of colonial dispossession, exacerbated by mining and the impacts of climate change, negatively affect their physical and mental health and well-being.[9] This is because, in the diverse Indigenous Australian spiritualities,[10] land and nature are not separated from humans nor objects for ownership and use, as they are within European-influenced political and legal frameworks. Land, sea, and sky are dynamic, integral parts of Indigenous Australian communities, relationships,

and spiritualities.[11] This connection to the landscape is the source of life and well-being of the community, providing intimate and continual connection between present generations and their ancestors.

> ***Indigenous ontologies and spiritualities are rich and diverse. Yet echoes of these holistic, integrated relations between people and the earth are seen throughout Latin America,[12] Asia,[13] the Pacific,[14] and Africa.[15] Taking the insights of these ontologies seriously in each relevant context, rather than dismissing, homogenizing, or idealizing them, could help policymakers and researchers overcome anthropocentric problems that continue to impede meaningful action on climate change and the pursuit of just climate futures.***

This is not a new argument,[16] yet while it has become more common since the turn of the millennium,[17] it is still far from mainstream. Engaging deeply and seriously with First Nations ontologies would mean not merely operationalizing or using Indigenous spiritualities as a convenient tool for communicating technical or scientific strategies and solutions to climate change but listening to, learning from, and allowing Indigenous knowledge to shape how research is done. Lumping Indigenous spiritualities under the category of religion leads to them being tarred with the same secularist Enlightenment assumptions that this worldview, in its extreme, attaches to almost all transcendental

frameworks – that they are primitive, irrational, and violent.[18] We must debunk these assumptions and nuance our understanding of religion and the secular[19] to create pathways for new knowledge and collaboration across the imagined secular/religious divide.

While there has been a growing awareness of the need to integrate religion into policy discourses,[20] the power dynamics that legitimize some phenomena as secular and marginalize others as religious remain operative in contemporary climate politics, replicating existing forms of sociopolitical injustice. Anna Gade[21] and Rosemary Hancock[22] highlight this dynamic in their work on Muslim environmentalism. The division of action into religious and political is at the center of this debate, since it fabricates a distinction in the practices and lives of Muslim environmentalists, which they do not recognize themselves.[23] The difficulty of clearly distinguishing between environmental, political, and Islamic practice suggests that it may not be possible — nor indeed an accurate reflection of lived reality — to make this distinction between the political, the secular, and the religious.

A first step to get research and policymaking away from this kind of limited secularist thinking about religion is to stop asking questions about what religion *does* in relation to specific issues, events, and challenges and instead move to asking what religion *means* for different people in different contexts. Further, scholars and policymakers need to resist the easy shorthand of religion as a catchall term and be more precise regarding who and what we are referring to. One way to do this is to refer, instead to religious actors, narratives, and identities.[24] Focusing on religious actors (including institutions), rather than the undifferentiated category of religion, recognizes their potential as a base for social change, attributable to their organizing force, social embeddedness, and political legitimacy in diverse contexts.[25]

This is a possible first step. It may be, however, that in order to truly disrupt secularist Enlightenment frameworks, scholars and policymakers will need to move beyond seeing the world through the categories of religion and the secular and focus instead on what it is that both represent — different existential realities.

Cultural anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Mario Blaser have championed the idea that we do not inhabit one ontology or one world and interpret it differently based on our contexts and experiences. They contend that we all inhabit different worlds and operate according to different rules, where the same actions may have different consequences. This does not mean that we must embrace these other worlds, but we must take seriously the other person's or community's experience of their reality. Their insights offer us a mode for communicating across different worlds, thereby facilitating greater cooperation.[26] Such engagement should also be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the ongoing power imbalances and inequalities that exist among different worlds, especially ontologies outside of dominant secular, rationalist, and modernist frames.[27]

The 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report provides an instructive example here. IPCC reports provide the international community – governments, civil society, researchers, and the general public – with the most up-to-date scientific assessment of diverse aspects of the climate crisis. They outline the current state of affairs and provide scientifically grounded advice for the actions and next steps required to address the crisis adequately and effectively. In the last decade, calls have been growing for these reports to go beyond traditional hard sciences and include insights from more diverse disciplines, specifically sociology, political science, anthropology (Victor 2015) and Indigenous knowledges (Ford et al. 2016). The 2022 IPCC report, for the first time, went beyond reporting on the effects of climate change on Indigenous Peoples and featured Indigenous

knowledges and cultural heritages alongside Western science and proactively sought to ensure that Indigenous people were portrayed in a respectful way. Yet as Moggridge et al. (2022) highlight, this historic improvement still fails to include Indigenous lead authors. The IPCC selects lead authors, whose governments then approve them. The absence of Indigenous lead authors is indicative of the ongoing power imbalances that continue to plague efforts to address the climate crisis. Indigenous scholars were invited to contribute to the Australasian chapter by the non-Indigenous lead authors. This means that Indigenous voices are still reliant on the goodwill of non-Indigenous scholars to have their perspectives and experiences heard and valued alongside Western science. Given that Indigenous knowledges, rather than being "myth, legend, or fable," as they are often described, are in fact based on "thousands of years of observation and practices to keep Country healthy," there is a strong case for valuing their insights at least as much as those provided by Western science.[28]

> ***Climate change exacerbates prior traumas, power imbalances, and inequalities and brings new traumas to new people and generations. Incorporating an awareness of these foundational world-ending ontological injustices and a commitment to addressing them in research and policymaking offers a pathway out of business-as-usual frameworks that got us into this predicament to begin with.***

The Shifting Power of the State

International relations scholarship, as well as other fields of research, are still in the hold of traditional frameworks that privilege the role of national governments as decision-making authorities for global policies. Yet at the policy level, cities and sub-state level actors drive of innovation and change across a range of areas, such as migration and climate change. This makes sense, since cities are the places not only where most greenhouse gas emissions occur but also where environmental policies are implemented first.[29] Further, the impacts of climate change are felt in hugely divergent ways from one part of a country to another. Independent of their size and level of economic development, cities are getting increasingly involved in finding solutions to the complex and challenging issues they face. These issues are traditionally seen as the responsibility of the national government, yet meaningful policy change related to climate has been glacially slow or nonexistent.

> ***As part of this growing significance of cities, we are witnessing a shift from the global city to the globally engaged city, whereby cities channel and emphasize their sense of responsibility to act. They are moving beyond seeking a place at the table of global policy discussions with national leadership and are instead demanding a leadership role in global governance in their own right. However, this shift in power and responsibilities has been undertheorized.[30]***

The leadership role of cities is not only changing vis-à-vis the nation-state; the leadership *approach* adopted by cities is also undergoing a fundamental shift. The most successful local governance happens in places where not only formal and informal powers are used but also where new multisectoral networks are established and supported to promote sustainable, inclusive, and innovative growth and just transitions.[31] Failure by researchers, practitioners, and national and international policymakers to acknowledge and support this shift to cities may even be an obstacle to achieving real progress in the pursuit of just climate futures.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in the past ten years, calls for broader stakeholder involvement in climate change adaptation have become louder beyond the Euro-American context, for instance, in the BRICs countries[32] and Malaysia,[33]. Building those inclusive multisectoral networks, however, is challenging. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. It requires local governments and policymakers to critically engage with their established partnerships and ways of work. This is where the destabilization of secularism also plays a role. Academia (and the humanities in particular) can make crucial contributions by highlighting and problematizing underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions and forms of othering that contribute to the exclusion of certain actors from multisectoral networks. Specifically, debunking secular assumptions about religion removes barriers for representatives from alternative ontological communities, opening up new ways to tackle climate change and (re)imagine just climate futures.

Moving Forward

Source: Li an Lim via Unsplash

Building on what we have discussed, we offer seven suggestions for scholarship and policy

to move away from these core beliefs of secularism and state-centrism to develop more integrated, intersectional, interdisciplinary, inclusive, and more just ways of being and working as we tumble head-first into uncertain climate futures.

1. **Dispel the secularist assumptions often associated with the category of religion** to open up space for collaboration with more diverse actors and worldviews.
2. **Avoid using religion and secular** as clumsy, reductionist shorthand for a vast array of diverse actors, worldviews, theologies, spiritualities, and ontologies. Instead, focus on actors, identities, and narratives in specific contexts.
3. **Normalize attention to existential meaning-making frameworks and ontologies in research, policy, and practice.** Make sure different worldviews are represented by those involved in research and policy and ensure they feel safe to speak from within that worldview and will be taken seriously.
4. **Highlight the links with questions of inequality, injustice, marginalization, and exclusion that are bound up with these existential meaning-making frameworks** and how the power inequalities between different ontologies are tied to inequalities and injustices based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, nationality, citizenship, and belonging.
5. **Be consciously interdisciplinary in research and practice.** Actively seek out interlocutors from different disciplines, ages, genders, sexual identities, spiritualities, ontologies, ethnicities, and classes.
6. **Focus on what unites us as scholars and policymakers rather than on what differentiates us,** because that must also be the core element we bring to everything we do in response to the climate crisis. We can only build new worlds out of the deaths of old ones if we work together.
7. **Focus on, celebrate, and work with the specificities of context.** There is also no

universal way in which climate change will impact all people everywhere. Consequently, we must work together but explicitly acknowledge the differences across our contexts.

Footnotes

[1] The title and some of the themes in this piece take their inspiration from Lloyd, "End of the World" and of course, they also draw from the classic REM song of the same name. However, contrary to REM, we do not feel fine – far from it, in fact.

[2] Hinchliffe, '"Everything's Gone".

[3] Willis, Curato and Smith, "Deliberative Democracy"; Willis, "The Big Idea."

[4] International Monetary Fund, "Cost of Living Crisis"; Kikstra et al., "Social Cost of Carbon Dioxide."

[5] Godfrey and Torres, *Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change*; Harlan, Pellow and Roberts, "Climate Justice and Inequality."

[6] Pabst, "Secularism of Post-Secularity"; Birnbaum, "Exclusive Pluralism'"; Mavelli and Wilson, "Post-Secularism."

[7] See, for example, Feffer, "Climate Change"; Klein, *This Changes Everything*; Pelling, Manuel-Navarrete and Redclift, *Climate Change*; Steger, Goodman and Wilson, *Justice Globalism*.

[8] Shakman Hurd, *Politics of Secularism*; Gutkowski, *Secular War*.

[9] Mikhailovich and Pavli, “Freedom of Religion”; Petheram et al., “Strange Changes.”

[10] There are approximately 250 language groups among Australia’s First Nations people, each with their own unique story about the birth of land, sky, sea, and people. These stories are collectively referred to as *The Dreaming*, a term developed by Indigenous Australians to make their spiritualities intelligible for white people—see Yunupingu, “Concepts of Land and Spirituality”; Mikhailovich and Pavli, “Freedom of Religion.”

[11] Povinelli, “Do Rocks Listen?”

[12] See, for example, De la Cadena and Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds*; Carreño, “Mining and the Materiality of Mountains”; Carreño, “Climate Change.”

[13] See, for example, Vedwan, “Politics of Climate Change”; Duara, *Crisis of Global Modernity*; Kassam, “Anthropogenic Climate Change.”

[14] See, for example, Buckley, “Religious Influence and Climate Politics”; Bertana, “Religious Explanations for Coastal Erosion,” 77–98.

[15] See, for example, Tarusarira and Parsitau, “Religio-Spiritual and Sacred Dimensions of Climate-Induced Conflicts”; Tarusarira, “African Religion, Climate Change, and Knowledge Systems”; Maseno and Mamati, “Indigenous Beliefs on Environment and Climate Change Adaptation.”

[16] See, for example, Norman, “The Sacred Balance.”

[17] See, for example, Pauli et al., “Listening to the Sounds of the Water.”

[18] Wilson, *After Secularism*.

[19] Wilson, *Religion and World Politics*, ch. 2.

[20] Johnston and Sampson, *Religion*; Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism*; Berry, "The Right Climate"; Wilson, *Religion and World Politics*.

[21] Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms*.

[22] Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism*.

[23] Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism*.

[24] Wilson, *Religion and World Politics.*

[25] Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism*.

[26] Wilson, *Religion and World Politics*.

[27] Wilson, "Power Differences," 148.

[28] Moggridge et al., "IPCC Reports Still Exclude Indigenous Voices."

[29] Timmermans, "Closing Speech."

[30] Gordon and Ljungkvist, "Globally Engaged City."

[31] Katz and Nowak, *The New Localism*.

[32] Hügel and Davies, "Public Participation."

[33] Chitsa et al., "Citizen Participation and Climate Change."

[34] Sibiya et al., "Empowering the Voiceless."

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