

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**KATHARINE HAYHOE** is the director of Texas Tech University's Climate Science Center and an associate professor in the university's Political Science Department. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before her presentation on "Religion and the Roots of Climate Change Denial."

**OWENS:** How did you get involved in climate change advocacy, especially working on the climate change denial question?

**HAYHOE:** I was always interested in doing policy-relevant research. Up until we moved to Texas, I was doing climate science, and I was also doing a lot of regional impact studies. I was looking at what climate change means to the Great Lakes, or the Midwest, or the city of Chicago, and then I would talk to city planners or water managers or ecologists, people who needed that information to plan.

But you don't typically ask your scientist what church they go to on Sunday, just as you wouldn't ask your physician or your accountant what faith tradition they come from. It wasn't until we moved to Texas—which we did for the traditional academic reasons; with my husband being a linguistics professor, we were looking for a place together—that I got involved in advocacy work.

I knew moving to Texas that things were going to be different—I already knew that there were certain parts of the country where people were more likely to not think climate change was real than others—but I didn't know quite what to expect. Within two or three months, though, I started to get invitations to speak: to a women's group, at the Second Baptist Church, at a senior citizens' home. All of these people were curious.

They weren't really on board with climate change, but they were curious about it. I started to realize a lot of people's objections centered around their faith. If God is in control, how could this happen?



I also realized that to genuinely connect with people and to be able to share what I knew, I couldn't be just the traditional academic, where we're trained to leave our personality at the door and just give the facts. To genuinely connect with people, you have to connect from your heart, not from your head. I realized it's important to share who I am, what I believe, and how that affects my perspective on the science, because then I can identify with people and people can identify with me. Establishing that common base of

shared values actually helps us talk about difficult issues, as opposed to people assuming that I'm the stereotypical atheist tree-hugging scientist many (wrongly) assume us to be.

**OWENS:** What, in your view, is the most important religious objection to climate science?

**HAYHOE:** I think the real issue is that we have confused our politics with our faith. Rather than letting our faith determine what we believe and what we think is important, we are letting our politics dictate and even, to a certain extent, rewrite our statements of faith. That, I think, is the real problem.

But if you're talking about purely religious-based objections, I think the one that rises to the top most frequently is the issue of God's sovereignty: the idea that God set this world in place, and if puny little humans are somehow changing something that God created, that really challenges God's authority in the universe.

**OWENS:** If only a fraction of the small group that denies climate change has purely theological objections to it, does it make you wonder if you should bother to talk about religion at all in this context?

**HAYHOE:** I think that religion is both part of the problem and part of the solution. I think that in order to talk about climate change, why it matters, why we

need to do something about it, we *have* to connect the dots between the issue and what we believe. I don't think many of us can even move forward on this issue unless we connect those dots, so it's so important to bring faith into the discussion, but not to let it be used as an excuse to deny what God's creation is telling us.

**OWENS:** If the resistance is political, not religious, and you help to take away the religious objections in your conversations with these communities, can your efforts in fact influence people's political views?

**HAYHOE:** I hope so. As a Christian, I feel that it is a travesty for faith-based arguments to be used against an issue like climate change. If you're going to argue against it, you're welcome to. Everybody's entitled to their own opinions. But call it what it is. Call it the fact that ideologically, there are many people who don't want government. Anything that implies a government role in our personal lives is anathema to large sections of America. That is their opinion, and they are certainly entitled to have that opinion and to reflect that opinion in what they think about climate change. But don't cloak it with religious-sounding language.

**OWENS:** Are there are non-central-government-oriented responses to climate change that those of us of faith, as well as those without faith, can enact?

**HAYHOE:** I see myself as a policy agnostic. Almost anything is better than nothing. I particularly want to talk to people about free market solutions, about solutions that put money back in individual taxpayers' pockets, rather than sending more money to the government, because I know that those are solutions that people can get on board with.

**OWENS:** One of the issues in the muddling of political conversation about this is a very loose term, "belief." As a scientist, how do you respond to this question of belief, as it's posed? Should we try to stop this process of describing recognition of scientific data as something you can believe in or not?

**HAYHOE:** Yes, I absolutely think so. Now, just to play the devil's advocate for a minute, obviously you and I don't have the luxury of looking into all of the nuances of, say, immigration law or exactly what ISIS is doing, and what the roots are and what the solution is. So we have to make choices about who we're going to agree with and what opinions we're going to side with, and therefore, in essence,

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who we are going to “believe.” In that sense, we're all cognitive misers; we don't have the brainpower and the bandwidth to cover every single issue to the point where we know every fact.

But there is a radical difference between science and faith. Because you can say you do not believe in gravity, but if you jump off that cliff, you know what's going to happen. In the same way, we can say we do not believe in climate change. But

you know what? If we keep on producing carbon dioxide, we know what's going to happen. So I think we need to be careful to draw that line, because it's being used on both sides. It's being used by people to say, “you are positioning climate change as an alternate religion.” But it's also being used very loosely by people who do think climate change is real who ask others whether they “believe” in climate change, as if it were a religion. No wonder it creates conflict.

**OWENS:** Some academics are weighted down by a worry that public engagement is somehow contrary to their central mission. Do you see that in the climate science world? It seems so obvious to outsiders that revealing your results to the public is crucial. But within the climate science community, is that a problem, in the same way that it is for, say, scholars of theology or other things?

**HAYHOE:** We scientists are always wondering, “how far can we go?” We all definitely feel comfortable saying the climate is changing. We also feel comfortable saying it's changing because of human activities. Now, as a community, we're saying we need to do something about it.

The National Center for Atmospheric Research this summer set up a speakers' bureau for climate scientists, because people were begging for opportunities to get out and talk, but they didn't know how to find community groups. Within weeks of Climate Voices getting going, they had 200 scientists signed up, because we see all of this happening with our own eyes.

It's as if we're doctors or physicians of the planet. It's as if you went to the doctor and got a scan, and the doctor saw something happening in your body. You feel compelled to tell the people or the person who's affected by this. As a human, regardless of our faith tradition, we know that if we see a problem, and we are silent on that problem, it's wrong.

**OWENS:** There is a certain resistance among some folks about science as such.

To the extent that this conversation is now being engaged by your group of scientists, do you feel that there's any movement on this general issue, as opposed to the climate front?

**HAYHOE:** One of the people whose research I appreciate the most is Elaine Ecklund, who's a sociologist at Rice University. Her area of study is scientists and religion. She looks at the numbers in terms of what we scientists believe and shows how many of us believe in God, go to church, would agree with a given faith label—whether we are a Christian, or Jewish or Muslim. I think the perception that scientists are a bunch of godless atheists is not really valid, and my own experience has borne that out.

After telling people that I was a Christian, which was a little nerve-racking, I didn't know what to expect from my colleagues. I thought that a lot of them would basically say, "you've checked your brain at the door," or "you've given up on your integrity as a scientist." But instead I've had so many colleagues come up to me and share their own faith and their own spiritual views with me in a way that's really encouraged me and helped me to see that we all start with something. We come at this problem with a certain set of views. For many of us, it comes from our faith. For others, it doesn't come from faith but it does come from a deep sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is moral and what is immoral.

I think it's important for people to realize that as scientists, we're humans. Many of us are doing climate science out of a conviction that we want to understand more



about this amazing planet we live on, and also that we want to make sure everybody knows what is going on with our planet, so that we can make the right decisions.

**OWENS:** Have you had any struggles with the theological implications of the science you've found yourself? Have you found that to be challenging to your own religious beliefs?

**HAYHOE:** I haven't, but I was really fortunate that I grew up with a dad who was a science educator and also a lay pastor in our local church. He did a lot of the emotional wrestling in advance, so from an early age I grew up with this idea that when science and faith appear to be in conflict, it's because we do not fully understand one or the other or both. That's a pretty unique perspective to grow up with.


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