"Rev. Mariama White-Hammond, Minister for Ecological Justice at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Boston and a leader with the Massachusetts Interfaith Coalition for Climate Action" Image by Better Future Project/350 Massachusetts Best Photos's photostream. https://www.flickr.com/photos/350massbetterfuture/34303033016

Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic–or human caused–climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Christians work tirelessly to change their habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Christian environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Christians described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Christian. As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

Christianity and Oil in U.S. History

The world is currently grappling with its relationship to fossil fuels. While the International Energy Agency has stated that investment and development of oil and other fossil fuels must stop if the world is to stay within safe limits of global heating,[1] in the 2020s the United States has continued to use about 7.3 billion barrels of oil per year.[2] During lawsuits over their role in climate change, fossil fuel companies have argued that calls to limit fossil fuels "challenge the way human civilization has developed to this date."[3] Politicians have echoed this language, claiming that "human flourishing requires fossil fuels."[4] In the U.S., oil has become central to many narratives about human prosperity and progress. A key factor in how these stories developed is American Christianity. The intertwined history of Christianity and oil in the U.S. also sheds light on who has been excluded from these stories of progress.

Americans began searching for oil shortly after the civil war and this extraction, trade, and sale of oil generated wealth for many individuals, families, and towns. For some White American Christians in the 19th and 20th centuries, wealth generated from the oil industry was seen as a sign of God's favor.[5] One of the first oil prospectors, Presbyterian Reverend S.J.M. Eaton, declared in his 1866 record *A History of Oil in Venango County, Pennsylvania*: "Providence

[1] Fiona Harvey, "No new oil, gas or coal development if world is to reach net zero by 2050, says world energy body," theguardian.com, *The Guardian*, May 18, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/18/no-new-investment-in-fossil-fuels-demands-top-energy-economist.

[2] "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): How much oil is consumed in the United States?," eia.gov, U.S. Energy Information Administration, last modified October 9, 2024, https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=33&t=6.

[3] Amy Westervelt, "Big Oil Is Trying To Make Climate Change Your Problem To Solve. Don't Let Them," rollingstone.com, *Rolling Stone*, May 14, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/climate-change-exxonmobil-harvard-study-1169682/.

[4] Abigail Weinberg, "Vivek Ramaswamy's Campaign Slogan Is a Reverse 'In This House, We Believe' Yard Sign," motherjones.com, *Mother Jones,* August 24, 2023, https://www.motherjones.com/mojo-wire/2023/08/vivek-ramaswamys-campaign-slogan-is-a-reverse-in-this-house-we-believe-yard-sign-is-that-on-purpose-gop-debate-2024/.

[5] Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (Basic Books, 2019); J. T. Henry, *The Early and Later History of Petroleum, with Authentic Facts in Regard to Its Development in Western Pennsylvania.*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1965).

unlocked the golden treasures in our Western States and Territories, and every department of business has become prosperous . . . a new lesson has been taught the world: that God's treasures are inexhaustible."[6] For many of these men, oil was seen not only as a natural resource, but a sign that God had blessed the United States with natural resources that could be converted into wealth.

John D. Rockefeller and J. Howard Pew considered the oil industry a means to expand their personal Christian ideals. Each founded large oil companies and felt that their wealth was purposefully given to them by God to use as they deemed fit.[7] Rockefeller considered himself a Northern Baptist and used oil money to fund numerous ecumenical projects and Christianity missionary efforts overseas. Pew considered himself a Presbyterian and provided seed money to numerous parachurch organizations like *Christianity Today* and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Today, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust are two of the largest philanthropic organizations in the United States.

Some oil prospecting White Christians and their families were pushed out of the East Coast by large companies like Rockefeller's Standard Oil. During an era of U.S. Westward expansion premised on the concept of divinely ordained "manifest destiny," these families traveled west to dig on their own and developed a fiercely independent identity dubbed "Wildcat Christianity." These communities formed a relationship to the incredibly dangerous work of oil extraction in which they saw the combination of huge risk and huge payoffs as a divine gift, one intended to be used in part to spread the gospel of Christianity in the American West.[8]

Despite these powerful stories characterizing oil as a divine gift for human flourishing in America, many non-White communities were kept from accessing oil and the wealth it generated. For example, much of the land that wildcatters wished to drill belonged to Indigenous communities. Oil prospectors benefited from the Dawes Act of 1887 under which all community-held Native lands were divided into individual plots for private ownership. Only the Native Americans who accepted this division of tribal lands were eligible for U.S. citizenship.[9] The remaining Native land was seized by the federal government and sold to White individuals. This switch from communally-owned property

---

[6] Samual John Mills Eaton, *Petroleum: A History of the Oil Region of Venango County, Pennsylvania: Its Resources, Mode of Development, and Value: Embracing a Discussion of Ancient Oil Operations* (Philadelphia, PA: J. P. Skelley & co., 1866), 61.

[7] John T. Flynn, *God's Gold: The Story of Rockefeller and His Times* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 401; Karl Zinsmeister, "J. Howard Pew," in *The Almanac of American Philanthropy* (Washington, D.C.: Philanthropy Roundtable, 2016), https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/hall-of-fame/j-howard-pew/.

[8] Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil.*

[9] "Dawes Act (1887)," Milestone Documents, National Archives, accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dawes-act.

to individual property encouraged Native and Black individuals to lease their land to White oilmen.[10]

When Native and Black families did generate their own wealth by both leasing their land to White settlers, as well as extracting and selling oil themselves, many White prospectors were angered. White oilmen advocated for legislation to prevent Native and Black communities from controlling oil production or to deem them unfit to do so.

Oklahoma was the site of two stories of violence that erupted around these tensions in the 1920s. The Black community of Tulsa's Greenwood District, also called Black Wall Street, grew wealthy from oil royalties. The city was also nicknamed "City of Churches" because of the number of Christian houses of worship that were built during the oil boom. On May 31, 1921, growing White resentment toward Black wealth boiled over and White mobs destroyed and looted the Greenwood District.[11] The Native Osage people of Oklahoma had also gained significant oil wealth under the Allotment Act of 1906, which granted them royalties to oil extracted on Osage land. As their wealth grew, over 60 mysterious or unsolved murders were committed, targeting Osage land rights holders. William K. Hale, a wealthy and influential rancher whose nephew had married an Osage woman, was eventually found guilty of orchestrating the killings to gain access to the oil wealth from these royalties.[12]

Today, we can see echoes of these narratives about oil in the United States as well as the limitations of who can participate. While speaking to oil workers in Midland, Texas in 2019, the vice president, Mike Pence, stated, "[Through] your continued efforts . . . developing the vast, natural, God-given resources that we have in this land, I know we will make America more prosperous than ever before."[13] That same year Black Americans made up only 9% of the oil industry, earned on average 23% less than their White counterparts, and were 75% more likely to live within half a mile of a high-polluting oil or gas facility.[14] In response to these inequities and the looming crisis of fossil-fuel driven climate change, there are growing examples of how people from within all these diverse Christian communities are drawing on religion to shift the narratives around oil. Learn more about these below.

---

[10] Mark Boxell, "From Native Sovereignty to an Oilman's State: Land, Race, and Petroleum in Indian Territory and Oklahoma," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 2 (2021): 216-233, doi: 10.1017/S1537781420000808.

[11] Ellen Knickmeyer, "'The foundation of the wealth': Why Black Wall Street boomed," apnews.com, *AP News*, June 1, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/ok-state-wire-business-race-and-ethnicity-874fade343fc7515210117c4efe1335f; *1921 Tulsa Race Massacre*, Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, November 3, 2022, https://www.tulsahistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/.

[12] David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2017).

[13] Shane Battis, "Vice President Mike Pence visits Midland, praises Permian Basin's energy dominance," firstalert7.com, *First Alert 7*, April 18, 2019, https://www.firstalert7.com/content/news/Vice-President-Mike-Pence-visits-Midland-praises-Permian-Basins-energy-dominance-508735751.html.

[14] National Association of Evangelicals, *Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment* (Washington, DC: NAE, 2022), https://www.nae.org/loving-the-least-of-these/.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources

- Park, Kyle. “Kyle Park - Don’t Forget Where You’ve Come From (Official Video).” Paul De La Cerda, producer. YouTube. April 28, 2017. Music Video, 4:37. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igebPI3Fyf0&ab_channel=KylePark.
- Park, Kyle. “Don’t Forget Where You Come From Lyrics.” genius.com. Genius. https://genius.com/Kyle-park-dont-forget-where-you-come-from-lyrics.
- Burnett, John. “Drilling For Oil, Based On The Bible: Do Oil And Religion Mix?” npr.org. NPR, November 27, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/11/27/247465505/texas-oil-man-commanded-by-the-bible-drills-in-israel%C2%A0. (Interview with John Brown, Founder and CEO of Zion Oil and Gas Company.)
- National Association of Evangelicals. *Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment.*(Washington, DC: NAE, 2022, https://www.nae.org/loving-the-least-of-these/. (National Association of Evangelicals, an organization originally funded by oil giant J. Howard Pew, April 2022 statement on climate change.)

Secondary Sources

- Pesca, Mike. “Where Christianity Meets Big Oil.” slate.com. Slate Magazine, June 17, 2019. https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/06/historian-darren-dochuk-intersection-oil-christianity-america.html. (University of Notre Dame historian Darren Dochuk on the intersection of oil and Christianity in America.)
- Pierre-Louis, Kendra. “The Fossil Fuel Industry's Legacy of White Supremacy.” sierraclub.org. Sierra, April 2, 2021. https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/fossil-fuel-industrys-legacy-white-supremacy.
- Tu, Maylin. “The Black Churches Lifting Up Climate Resilience.” nextcity.org. Next City, December 1, 2023. https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/the-black-churches-lifting-up-climate-resilience.
- Giaimo, Cara. “This faith leader finds the common ground to address a moral emergency.” grist.org. Grist Magazine, April 5, 2019. https://grist.org/culture/this-faith-leader-finds-the-common-ground-to-address-a-moral-emergency/.
- Nelson, Cody. “‘Their greed is gonna kill us’: Indian Country fights against more fracking.” theguardian.com. *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/10/new-mexico-fracking-navajo-indian-country.
- Osborne, Tracey. “Native Americans Fighting Fossil Fuels.” *Scientific American* (blog), April 9, 2018. https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/voices/native-americans-fighting-fossil-fuels/.

- Smietana, Bob. “Presbyterians to divest from 5 oil companies, including Exxon Mobil, after years of debate.” religionnews.com. Religion News Service, July 7, 2022. https://religionnews.com/2022/07/07/presbyterians-to-divest-from-5-oil-companies-including-exxon-mobil-after-years-of-debate/.

Discussion Questions

- Explore one of the primary source documents listed above. What messages and narratives about oil do you see represented? How is religion embedded in these messages and narratives? How do these narratives compare to or contrast messages about oil or other fossil fuels that you have heard in the media or within communities of which you are a part? How do these compare to your own associations with oil and fossil fuels?
- Read either of the first two secondary sources to learn more about the history of oil and Christianity in America. What examples do you see of direct, structural, and cultural violence? How do they intersect within these histories? What might forms of direct, structural, and cultural peace look like in response to these histories?
- Choose any two of the last five secondary sources, each of which highlights an individual or community disrupting an aspect of U.S. relationships to oil and other fossil fuels. How are these individuals or communities responding to earlier stories about oil that you learned about in this case study? How can you use Galtung’s typology of violence and peace to describe their actions and interventions?
- After exploring the primary and secondary sources, choose one example of internal diversity or change over time within a religious tradition that stands out to you. What do you understand about how and why these forms of diversity developed, and what are you left wondering about? How do these forces support manifestations of both violence and peace within the tradition?