WHAT OBAMA AND ROMNEY CAN TEACH EXXONMOBIL ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

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For almost 20 years members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility have been raising the issue of climate change among a host of other issues that began with South Africa in the early '70s. Now we are finding ourselves aligned with both candidates for President about climate change at the same time we continue to challenge another President: the Chief Executive Officer of ExxonMobil, Rex Tillerson. a unique constellation of our faith-based concerns about climate change aligning with the positions of the two presidential candidates. However, while the candidates for President of the U.S. agree on the reality and threats related to climate change, they do not get support from the President of ExxonMobil.

While most would assume that Barack Obama would have concerns about climate change (which he reiterated at the Democratic National Convention), the same cannot be said of Mitt Romney. Last October Romney stated clearly: "We don't know what's causing climate change on this planet. And the idea of spending trillions and trillions of dollars to try to reduce CO2 emissions is not the right course for us." As I listened to the Republican presidential debates, he reiterated basically the same position. However something happened to change the thinking of Mitt Romney between then and now on this issue, besides seeming to agree with Obama that continued subsidies to the gas and oil industry will be "on the table" if he wins the election.

However, in his written response to questions from a group of scientific organizations, Governor Romney stated on the Sciencedebate website in September: "I am not a scientist myself, but my best assessment of the data is that the world is getting warmer, that human activity contributes to that warming and that policymakers should therefore consider the risk of negative consequences."

An examination of Romney's statement includes three parts: 1) there is climate change ("the world is getting warmer"); 2) "human activity contributes to that warming" (through the burning of fossil fuels and other carbon and methane releases); and 3) we need to act ("policy should therefore consider the risk of negative consequences").

As a member of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, along with my colleagues, I have been raising the "big three" questions with ExxonMobil in correspondence and attendance at its annual meetings since 1997. After having the position of Mitt Romney, ExxonMobil finally admitted the first two about 5 years ago. Yet it waffles on the third: what to do about climate change and the need to mitigate the human factors that contribute to it. In a speech before the Council on Foreign Relations June 27, Rex Tillerson acknowledged the existence of global warming and that the burning of fossil fuels is a key contributor to this problem. However he said that the consequent risks "can be mitigated." Rather than working to find ways to avoid its increasingly negative consequences (which many farmers have experienced dramatically in my State of Wisconsin), Tillerson talked about ways society could adapt to it and how he believed engineering would solve the problem. "We have spent our

entire existence adapting. We'll adapt," he said. "it's an engineering problem and there will be an engineering solution."

Meanwhile, through its various memberships and trade associations like the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Chamber of Commerce and the American Petroleum Institute, ExxonMobil is doing everything to lobby Republicans and Democrats to continue our nation's dependence on the same source of energy that is now choking to death people and the planet (as well as farmers' profits and our pocketbooks).

In the same speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Rex Tillerson blamed part of the problem we face on an "illiterate" public. With both presidential candidates finally agreeing on the reality of climate change and the negative impacts of and risks associated with continued fossil fuel use, perhaps this may contribute to the "literacy" that is needed by an informed public to challenge ExxonMobil to move from an almost total dependence on processes that pollute to responsible energy sourcing for the long-term health of people and the planet. Mr. Tillerson seems to have made a faith-based of the unquestioned ability of technology to solve this problem. As people of faith, we think (and believe) differently.

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