Chasing Ice is a film that makes global warming personally vivid. It reaches a variety of audiences, capturing even the most hardened media-surfers with its stunning visual evidence. Into the sea, glaciers drop huge pieces the size of lower Manhattan. Massive land glaciers melt before one’s eyes in time-lapsed sequences. The film profiles a nature photographer named James Balog, who captured the sequences showing the melt. At great personal and professional risk, Balog painstakingly retrieved images of fading glaciers for the far-away public. He believes that most people will not acknowledge the significance of climate data until they see melting glaciers for themselves. Viewers of the documentary film follow Balog into heights and depths of ice and find visceral levels of fear and sorrow alongside fascination, curiosity, and strangely sublime, unique beauty. The last part of the film shows Balog taking his footage and message to audiences and provides brief interviews with a variety of scientists, activists and others who respond to Balog’s work. At 75 minutes, the documentary is an appropriate length for classrooms as well as personal enjoyment.

While the film does not espouse any religious views, Chasing Ice nevertheless triggers religious responses. The images of melt and their implications challenge notions of human prominence, opening a realm of wonder, awe, mystery, repulsion, and dread—all ingredients in early essentialist definitions of religion exercised by scholars such as Rudolph Otto. Chasing Ice frames the conundrum of fascination and repulsion in glacial melt, and probes regret for the invasive behaviors of humans in the environment.

The massive and enduring glaciers embodied nature’s power, Balog observed, but they stand in stark fragility when one sees them melting or breaking (15 min.). Balog admits to a ‘strange bizarre fascination in seeing things you don’t usually get to see coming alive’ (58 min.). Ironically, the observed liveliness is the decomposition of the glaciers. Hence, Balog said, ‘miracle and horror’ juxtapose. What we see is ‘magical, miraculous’, but also ‘terrifying’ (68 min.). Humans turn away in denial. Balog commented: ‘If I hadn’t seen it [the melting] in the pictures, I wouldn’t believe it at all’ (30 min.).

Perched on a glacial ridge, Balog reflected: ‘The scope of glaciers dying is hard to see’, and then his voice broke and Balog fell silent. He looked over the ice-scape until choking out with emotion: ‘You know, sometimes you go out over the horizon, and you don’t come back’ (49 min.). At that point at least, Chasing Ice traipses across a threshold marked by religion.

Since Balog retrieved the visual evidence of just how deeply the world is in peril, one interviewee in the film called him ‘a visionary [whose] works are like sacred
objects’ (56 min.). For many who are themselves religious, and indeed for some scholars of the category religion, the sacred, i.e. ‘The Holy’, reveals human limitation and demands a new path. Balog told of his own reorientation: ‘I didn’t think humans were capable of changing the basic chemistry and physics of the planet’. Then he saw ancient ice cores proving an unprecedented spike in warming. Balog reluctantly admitted that ‘the air that we live in is changing—the basic physics of what we breathe’ from human activity (21 min.). Humans have exerted some god-like power in nature but proved thereby their finitude.

Like Bill McKibben in *Eaarth: Making a Home on a Tough New Planet* (2011), *Chasing Ice* suggests that earth is now different from the planet known by human ancestors. Facing that reality triggers a massive grief process just under the surface of common perceptions and well-worn social patterns. The thaw of the glaciers evokes collective grief, shared by humankind but fiercely denied in many ways. *Chasing Ice* is about coming to grips with the culpability of humans in the warming earth, the irony of our presumed god-like status, and the clear non-irony of its end. Yet the film also delivers an unprecedented visage to what Balog called ‘a limitless universe of forms out there that is insanely, ridiculously beautiful’. He sensed that ‘the story’ of those forms and beauty was ‘in the ice somehow’ (4 min.). Religion stripped of pride and baptized in glacial melt may learn to tell a story of grace beyond human control and emerge from frozen denial into an ethic of long-suffering care. The film’s scenes of painstaking data collection, clear-minded analysis, and openness to findings suggest initial steps that people of many different traditions could take together, even though strategies and stories to interpret and respond to the grief and the thaw are going to vary wildly.

*Chasing Ice* is showing in a number of venues and will be released on DVD in September 2013. See [http://www.chasingice.com/](http://www.chasingice.com/).

Reference


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