

SYMPOSIUM: THE POPE'S ENCYCLICAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY THEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN *LAUDATO SI'*

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Pope Francis has more epistemological and moral authority than any scientist, philosopher, lawyer, or politician. He has the second most popular twitter feed, and his messages are more likely to be retweeted than anyone else's. The Pope has the power to order some and to persuade others. Most of all he has the power to affect the global agenda. When the Pope speaks, people listen.

Pope Francis commands respect for many reasons. He sits atop a hierarchy with which 1.2 billion people are affiliated. Organized more like a multinational corporation than a nation-state, the Catholic Church and its members are spread across all the countries of the world. But it is not just Catholics who take his pronouncements seriously. As a man of the South, occupying an office in the North, with no national allegiance except to a country of 110 acres with a population of 842, he is uniquely situated to speak out on global issues. *Laudato Si'* also commands respect because it is an astonishingly well-written argument for a powerful point of view, one that in various bits and pieces can be found in the small journals and ignored books of environmental philosophy and theology.

Much of what has been written about *Laudato Si'* falsely portrays it as primarily a political document, focused especially on climate change. The Pope's acceptance of the scientific consensus on climate change has been seen as a bold challenge to the climate change deniers in the Republican Party in the United States. But only in America, increasingly dominated by a weird fusion of fundamentalist Christianity and extreme right wing politics, would it be thought that there is anything bold about a religious figure endorsing mainstream scientific views. Despite occasional historical setbacks, whatever theoretical war there was between science and religion in the Roman Catholic Church came to a happy end in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.

Rather than a rebuke to sitting politicians, *Laudato Si'* is primarily a work of moral theology focusing on the human relationships to God and nature. Its politics flows from its ethics, and its concern with climate change comes from its broader focus on "care for our common home."

Pope Francis comes to many of the same conclusions as secular environmental philosophers. We are in environmental crisis: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."¹ There are irreversible features of nature with irreplaceable value: "We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves."² We fail to acknowledge

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¹ POPE FRANCIS, ENCYCLICAL LETTER LAUDATO SI' OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME, para. 21 (2015).

² *Id.* at para. 34.

limits: “The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes”³ It is the poor who suffer most from our carelessness with the planet: “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.”⁴

Pope Francis’s discussion of nonhuman animals is especially striking. It is at odds with much of the conventional Catholic tradition, and it is here where his solidarity with his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, is the clearest. Species have “value in themselves”⁵ and each “creature of God is good and admirable in itself.”⁶ No wonder Peter Singer tweeted that “a vegan Pope is the next logical step.”⁷

Despite the Pope’s regard for nature he explicitly rejects the philosophical view known as “biocentrism.” This is because he thinks that biocentrism is committed to the idea that all individual living things or species are morally equal.⁸ This is a mistake. Biocentrism, in its most generic form, holds that all living things or species should be valued in themselves, but has no necessary commitment to how much each living thing or species should be valued. A biocentrist can hold that some living things or species should be valued more than others, though all should be valued in themselves. Indeed, this is the Pope’s view. Contrary to what he thinks, Pope Francis is a biocentrist.⁹

There are different views even within egalitarian biocentrism, for there are different ideas of equality. For example, equality can imply equal treatment, but it can also imply equality of consideration which may not imply equal treatment. A biocentric egalitarian can hold, for example, that the interests of humans and slime molds should be equally considered, but that the interests of humans should generally be preferred to those of slime molds. Both humans and slime molds should be valued in themselves, but humans are more valuable than slime molds. This is the Pope’s view. Not only is Pope Francis a biocentrist, but his views are consistent with some versions of egalitarian biocentrism.

Biocentrists can also disagree about their metaethics. They may be realists and believe that value “inheres” in individuals or species.¹⁰ Or they may incline towards a subjectivism or expressivism that sees intrinsic value as a way of valuing individuals or species, rather than as a metaphysical fact about individuals or species.¹¹ Some things may be more appropriate objects than others for intrinsically valuing, but on this view talk of intrinsic value is derived from a kind of valuing rather than directly reporting a feature of the object of the evaluation.

Pope Francis has a different view, one that is unusual by the standards of contemporary philosophy. It is fundamentally theological in outlook. The Pope’s world is one of movement, becoming, and change towards the fuller realization of being. Like Plato and Aquinas, he sees being as admitting of degrees and replete with

³ *Id.* at para. 116.

⁴ *Id.* at para. 48 (quoting BOLIVIAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, PASTORAL LETTER ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN BOLIVIA EL UNIVERSO, DON DE DIOS PARA LA VIDA 17 (2012)).

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *supra* note 1, at para. 33.

⁶ *Id.* at para. 140.

⁷ Peter Singer (@PeterSinger), TWITTER (June 19, 2015, 08:59 AM).

⁸ For more on this point see Brian Henning, *Stewardship and the Roots of the Ecological Crisis*, in FOR OUR COMMON HOME: PROCESS-RELATIONAL RESPONSES TO *LAUDATO SI'* (John B. Cobb, Jr. & Ignacio Castuera eds, 2015).

⁹ Some biocentrists hold that it is individual living things that should be valued in themselves while others think that it is species. The Pope seems to think that it is both individuals and species that should be so valued. When we speak of species we may be speaking of all those individuals who are members of a species, or we may be referring to something more abstract. If we use “species” in the former way, then biocentrism is the view that all living things should be valued in themselves. If we use “species” in the latter way, we may not have that view. For more on biocentrism see DALE JAMIESON, ETHICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: AN INTRODUCTION, Ch. 6 (2008).

¹⁰ See, e.g., HOLMES ROLSTON III., ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: DUTIES TO AND VALUES IN THE NATURAL WORLD (1988). Rolston III embraces “ecocentrism” as well as biocentrism. For a discussion of ecocentrism, see Jamieson, *supra* note 9.

¹¹ For a subjectivist metaethic coupled with an ecocentric outlook, see ROBERT ELLIOT, FAKING NATURE: THE ETHICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION (1977). Generally on metaethical views in environmental ethics see Jamieson, *supra* note 9, at Ch. 3.

value. The Pope appears to be influenced by “process” theology of the sort developed by the American Protestant theologian, John Cobb. The twentieth century figures who are the inspiration for these views are Alfred North Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin. For Pope Francis, value is always relational but not subjective, since it depends on God.

One way to see the distinctiveness of the Pope’s vision is in contrast with that of an important Protestant religious figure, Albert Schweitzer, who advocated “reverence for life.” While there are similarities in their views, one of the most striking differences is the different perspectives from which they view animals and nature. Schweitzer was deeply influenced by the German philosophical tradition—by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche—and Kant, on whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation. Schweitzer seems to put himself in the place of a Kantian agent, searching for the fundamental principle of ethics. That principle, he asserts, is reverence for all living things, and the foundation for this is the observation that all living things will to live: “The most immediate fact of man’s consciousness is the assertion ‘I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live.’”¹² This focus on the will, central to the German philosophical tradition, does not play the same role in *Laudato Si’*. Rather than seeing himself as a Kantian agent, Pope Francis seems to put himself in the role of brother to various living things: “we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.”¹³ All living things are on the same voyage: to express their love for and dependence on God. Schweitzer’s biocentrism is fundamentally rooted in the Enlightenment tradition. Pope Francis’s biocentrism flows from his theocentric vision. As with much of the Jewish and Islamic traditions, the centrality of God diminishes without eliminating the importance of humanity in the story of divine creation.

Pope Francis has a “comprehensive doctrine,”¹⁴ grounded in theology, but spreading out over the nooks and crannies of everyday life, telling us how to live and organize our societies. Yet, *Laudato Si’* is addressed to believers and nonbelievers alike. It can be seen as the latest installment in a public dialogue that has largely been dormant since a few years after the 1987 publication of the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*.¹⁵

The environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s in the countries of the North was countered in the 1970s by demands that problems of poverty and underdevelopment be acknowledged as global priorities. Building on the 1980 Brandt Commission report and the 1982 Palme Commission report, *Our Common Future* was a response to these apparently conflicting demands. The solution to the “interlocking crises” of environment and development, according to the Brundtland Commission, is “sustainable development.” While this phrase has its uses, the problem is that “sustainable development” is largely a rhetorical solution to a deep and profound problem. *Our Common Future* largely ignored the spiritual values that animate the environmental movement and implicitly endorsed the idea that the development we all seek is what has already been achieved in North America and by the European social democracies. *Laudato Si’* reopens this discussion. It builds on thirty years of work in environmental philosophy, putting it in the context of Catholic moral theology, drawing on statements by recent popes and conferences of bishops, many of which Pope Francis cites. Global justice and compassion for the poor are at the center of this vision. Pope Francis implores us to see the faces of the poor and dispossessed, and not just the political and policy challenges they pose when we contemplate them as abstractions.

¹² ALBERT SCHWEITZER, *OUT OF MY LIFE AND THOUGHT* 156 (2009).

¹³ POPE FRANCIS, *supra* note 1, at para. 246.

¹⁴ JOHN RAWLS, *POLITICAL LIBERALISM* (1996)

¹⁵ WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, *REPORT OF THE WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT: OUR COMMON FUTURE*, UN Doc. A/42/427 (Mar. 20, 1987).

At this point we are confronted with the question of what exactly *Laudato Si'* is meant to accomplish. As I have said, it is fundamentally a work of theological ethics, but it sometimes lapses into language that sounds as if it were written by the foreign policy apparatus of the curia rather than by this inspirational and eloquent spiritual leader who is the Pope. We do not need Pope Francis to tell us that “the international community has still not reached adequate agreements about the responsibility for paying the costs of this energy transition.”¹⁶ Many of those who come to *Laudato Si'* because they have heard that the Pope is an ally on climate change probably have never read a papal encyclical before. It is not surprising that the Pope’s wandering remarks on policy is what they latch on to. They may not know what to do with the rest of this text.

Economists have complained that Pope Francis doesn’t seem to understand that climate change is a negative externality caused by market failure, and that the solution is to put a price on carbon. Too much time ministering to the poor in Argentina seems to have blinded him to the deliverances of Economics 101. Others have found Pope Francis dismissive of the need for technological innovation, and too critical of the wonders that it has brought us. Still others just seem puzzled by what his “plan” or “roadmap” is for addressing climate change. These critics recognize the Pope’s influence and typically say that he has done an excellent job of identifying the problem but fallen short on proposing solutions. Much of this criticism misses the point of *Laudato Si'* and reveals surprising naivete about how social change actually comes about.

First about roadmaps for social change: they are usually written after change occurs, not before. There was no roadmap for bringing down communism or how to computerize the economy, though after they occurred some claimed that they had planned it all along. What there was before social change was a great many people with dreams. Some of them thought they had roadmaps but were later seen to be delusional. Others felt that the world had obeyed them because it had gone in their direction, even though there was little evidence that they had caused it to do so. It’s true that the Pope doesn’t have a roadmap for addressing climate change, but neither do economists who favor a carbon tax. They both have some good ideas, but good ideas are not a roadmap for social change. If they were, we would be living in the heaven of Pareto-optimality.

The real source of these criticisms is that it is surprisingly difficult for economists and social scientists to find a place for values and moral change in their models. Economists, impressed by Adam Smith’s remark that the butcher and the baker make the world better, not because of their compassion and exemplary character, but through the pursuit of their self-interest, almost inevitably think of morality as a private matter that does not and should not bear on public policy. The rise of highly moralistic fundamentalisms all over the world only reinforce their view about what should be the case even as it seems to refute their view about what is the case. The fact is that values have public dimensions and that’s what makes them values rather than preferences. The sharp distinction often drawn between public policy and private morality is a false one. Values inform our policy goals and create the soil which makes it possible for policies to be enacted. Reading deeper into Smith we find a similar view. A moral background of trust and sympathy is required for the butcher and baker to engage in the stable and sustained market transactions that made everyone better off. There is a reason why Germany has taken strong action on climate change and the United States has not, and it is not because they have better economists, more dedicated policy wonks, or radically different national interests. The economist’s dream of a price on carbon will only occur in the United States once enough people are committed to (or permissive of) keeping fossil fuels in the ground. This commitment would express a value, and it is ethical reflection and public moralizing that can move us in this direction.

The vision of *Laudato Si'* is consistent with the broad vision of the modern church, though in emphasis and language it bears the stamp of this pope. Advocacy for the poor and dispossessed, skepticism about technology, suspicion of multinational corporations and globalized markets—all of this has appeared in earlier church

¹⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *supra* note 1, at para. 165.

documents to which Pope Francis refers. The encyclical does not distance itself from other teachings of the Church that are less attractive to those on the left: its stands against abortion, euthanasia, and “artificial contraception.” So it is a document of the Church.

This Pope, who cares so much about nature, animals, and the poor, still endorses pronatalist policies, at least by implication. He writes that “to blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues.”¹⁷ Well, yes, but refusing to address population growth is another way of refusing to “face the issues.” We want the Earth’s more than seven billion people to have decent lives, and this requires resources, including energy, and this stresses planetary systems and makes it extremely difficult for the other forms of life that are “good and valuable” in themselves to flourish. We will have made real progress on this issue when a Pope acknowledges that the greatest success story in lifting people out of poverty in human history occurred in a nation that aggressively pursued a “one-child” policy. That will not end the conversation but it will mark the beginning of one that acknowledges some neglected realities.

Rather than laying down the law, Pope Francis explicitly invites conversation, both with believers and nonbelievers. *Laudato Si'* is not a “roadmap” for Paris or a plan to address climate change. What Pope Francis has given us is what he promises at the outset of the encyclical: an “appeal . . . for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”¹⁸ If we read *Laudato Si'* in the way in which it is intended to be read, with open-hearted humility, it cannot help but forward the discussion of our “interlocking” crises of environment and development.

¹⁷ *Id.* at para. 50.

¹⁸ *Id.* at para. 14.