



COMMENTARY

Francis's Planetary Practice

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When the conclave met in March 2013 to anoint a new pope, with innumerable cameras and eyes trained on the famous Sistine Chapel chimney awaiting the emergence of white smoke, an adventurous seagull decided to alight there, holding its brown-flecked wings back and neck erect like a vigilant herald. By intruding on this technological spectacle of religion—it soon had its own Twitter account, swapping quips with that of the chimney—this gull seemed to offer itself as an avian omen for the re-(or not-too-dis-)enchanted. In the preface to his book on animals and the Bible, *Eden's Other Residents*, Michael Gilmour recounts his only half-joking excitement at this “delightful coincidence,” expressed in his own tweet at the time: “Hoping it’s a sign the next Pontiff will be a voice for non-human animals too!”¹ It did not take long for this hope to be doubled by the announcement of the accession of Argentine Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio—with the regnal name of Francis.

Francis! This saintly name still sings, eight centuries after the ascetic life of the nature-loving mendicant friar transfigured the Church from within. He is known for preaching to flowers and interceding for birds, liberating lambs and pacifying a wolf, for his love for the poor and outcast in imitation of Christ. His counterposition within Christianity’s hostility to nature is so time-honored that even historian Lynn White Jr., author of the much-debated 1967 *Science* essay critical of the religious roots of the ecological crisis, endorsed him as the patron saint of ecology—a suggestion sanctioned by Pope John Paul II in 1979.² He is also a patron of animals and, it must be said, of merchants and San Francisco, that hotbed of speculation in silicon and brick, as well as of stowaways. Francis himself has often stowed away on the supposedly most modern and secular of vessels, below deck or often in plain sight. He has been the favorite of a

1. Gilmour, *Eden's Other Residents*, xiii.

2. White, “St. Francis and the Ecologic Backlash.”

varied lot of thinkers: a living poem and mirror of Christ for G. K. Chesterton; an exemplar of cosmic love for phenomenologist Max Scheler.³ This fascination has only grown within contemporary philosophy. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri closed their first tome against empire and capitalism in 2000 by suggesting that we once again “find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being.”⁴ Cue the mockery of jaded critics: “Should [the multitude] play gentle melodies on their violins to pacify the Leviathans of neoliberal globalization, just as St Francis did with the wild animals in the woods?”⁵ But those more attuned to the operative legacy of religious discourse and practice continue to trawl the Franciscan archive for genuinely political potential, opposing poverty, the common, and interdependence to consumerism, property, and dominion. Giorgio Agamben, for example, passing through some monasteries on his approach to the summit of his *Homo Sacer* project, claimed to unearth, beyond Christian exegesis and hagiography, “perhaps the most precious legacy of Franciscanism, to which the West must return ever anew to contend with it as its undeferrable task: how to think a form-of-life . . . to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use.”⁶ The humble and joyous spirit of Saint Francis lives on, renewed and reinvented: stigmatic, nature mystic, communist, anti-instrumentalist, panpsychist, animalist, form-of-life experimentalist . . .

So when for the first time in the history of the Church the new pope took the evergreen saint as his namesake, “guide and inspiration,”⁷ reactivating a precious and fertile inheritance,⁸ the ripples were also felt widely outside the Church. And the publication in 2015 of his encyclical *Laudato si’* confirmed the vigor and intention with which Francis took up this flag. The letter did not merely address doctrinal issues for the upper echelons of Catholic hierarchy but spoke strongly to contemporary ecological and social issues, directed to “every person living on this planet” (§3)—Catholics and atheists, postsecularists and critical theorists, Deleuzians and Bonaventurans, practicing and nonpracticing (or practicing otherwise).

At the core of his message is the need to listen not only to the cry of the poor, as Catholicism has long claimed to do, but also to the groans of the earth, to which it has often been deaf (§49). With the interlocking of environmental and social justice at its core, the encyclical ranges over a vast array of issues relevant to “care for our common home.” It is a remarkable text, not least in the surprising pluralism of its citation practices, both implicit and explicit. It opens with words from the *Canticle of the Creatures* and takes pains to situate itself within pontifical tradition, but it also quotes heavily

3. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*; Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*.

4. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 413.

5. Boron, *Empire and Imperialism*, 99.

6. Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, xiii. On the Franciscanism of both Negri and Agamben, see Chiesa, “Giorgio Agamben’s Franciscan Ontology.”

7. Francis, *Laudato si’*, §10 (hereafter cited by section number in the text).

8. Boff, *Francis of Rome and Francis of Assisi*.

from bishops from Africa, Latin America, and Australasia, unmistakably draws on liberation theology, and commends other religious and indigenous perspectives. It forthrightly mixes in science and politics, summarizing current research on global warming—prompting blowback from American creationists and industrialist climate change deniers alike—and taking aim at international dithering and obstructionism. Francis outlines and bemoans many environmental and social injustices, from biodiversity loss and extinction, deforestation, and overfishing to pollution and waste, water scarcity and privatization, and the refugee crisis. He condemns the theft from future generations and developing nations, articulating an “ecological debt” owed by the north to the south (§51). He diagnoses many ills contributing to the destruction of the earth: a technocratic paradigm leading to the objectification and mastery of the world through overreliance on technology, rapid unchecked change, and faith in mythical unlimited growth (§§102–14); the anthropocentric divinization of humanity, who must be returned to their proper place in the spiritual order as the uniquely valuable, capable, and thus responsible stewards of God’s creation (§90); and various forms of instrumentalism, relativism, consumerism, and so on (but, as expected, not overpopulation [§50]). Against these troubles, Francis proposes an “integral ecology” (§137–62) that recognizes the intrinsic value and interdependence of all living beings in our common home and unequivocally connects environmental concerns with a recognition of the poor and marginal, who most often end up paying the price for “progress,” who are most gravely affected by environmental degradation, and who have often been made landless, their livelihood barred and culture disrupted, in the interest of nature protection.

Francis thus identifies many economic and political structures in the current social order that have brought suffering to the earth and the poor. But, he argues, at the heart of all these issues are broken relationships to God, neighbor, and Earth: a spiritual problem, to which he poses a likewise spiritual solution. Likely there will be much in this theological document that perturbs, if not flummoxes, even the most charitable of its secular readers: its language of “creation” alongside biodiversity, carbon, and fossil fuels; its personification of Earth as a sister and mother crying out in suffering; its mention of sin and conversion; its eschatological vision complete with reference to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Yet the pope insists on the importance of some form of postsecular return of religion to the public sphere,⁹ calling for “openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology” (§11) and for the broader integration of fragmented knowledge (§138), pleading for the inclusion of the “particular” (§63) language of religion and proper attention to its “treasures of wisdom” (§200), and attempting by his pen to validate its role in contemporary ecopolitics. At the same time, the encyclical situates itself within yet against much of the Christian tradition. This agonistic posture is evident in its ecological biblical hermeneutics. While ecocriticism

9. See de Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*.

has made inroads within biblical studies in the academy,¹⁰ here the challenge to anthropocentric traditions of biblical interpretation and theological argumentation comes from deep within the Vatican (§§65–75). Seeking to deflect the common charge against the Judeo-Christian ecological legacy, Francis insists on the erroneousness of the interpretation of the Creation accounts used to justify environmental domination, pairing the mandate to “have dominion” (Gen 1:28) over the Earth with that to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15), thus emphasizing “a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature” (§§66–67).

In addition to his rereading of sacred texts, the pope pays particular attention to spiritual practice, suggesting a number of ways in which personal transformation can supplement institutional reform. Rather than on the instability, anxiety, and self-centeredness of individualism and consumerism, people might draw on their irrepressible human creativity to instill new ecological habits and virtues, a liberating sobriety and serenity, through everyday actions of gratitude and wonder, intimacy and care, awareness and slowness. Opening their hearts to joyful and attentive communion with other creatures will heal broken relationships to the earth as to other people and the divine, to “help nurture that sublime fraternity with all creation which Saint Francis of Assisi so radiantly embodied” (§221). What Pope Francis seeks is not only a new lifestyle but a thoroughly ecological conversion, both interior and communal—indeed, a cultural revolution that would generate a different paradigm, enabling genuine freedom and creativity, one that “can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world” (§216).

Of course, relationships to animals and the earth have not typically been foregrounded in Catholic ritual.¹¹ Paul Shepard, shifting the question from “biblical and other doctrinal texts” to “liturgical practices” at the close of his chapter on Christianity in *The Others*, observes that Christianity is largely devoid of cosmological ceremonies:

Only occasionally in local parishes do priests go out and bless fields, do flowers decorate the altar, are seasons acknowledged in thinly disguised, old, pagan ways recognized for what they are—baptism bringing one forth from the water, coronations as metaphors on birth, burials as spiritual as well as bodily return to earth—and seldom are animals brought to services. If the formalities approved by Rome . . . are biologically the most barren and arrogant metaphysic, then the bending and infringement of these formalities in local practice offer the best hope for change in Christian cultures, however secular their outlook has become.¹²

10. See, to begin, Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* and the rest of the Earth Bible project.

11. For example, in the liturgical meditations of Romano Guardini, Pope Francis’s main theological source on the ills of modernity (he began work on a doctoral dissertation on Guardini in the 1980s, and he cites Guardini’s book *The End of the Modern World* numerous times in the encyclical), elements of the natural world symbolize divine being and action. Guardini, *Sacred Signs*.

12. Shepard, *Others*, 241–42.

Francis does not quite give his blessing to such minor infractions, not to mention the numerous other animistic or otherwise zoophilic practices and cosmologies incorporated into the Christian “sponge” by the peoples it helped to colonize. He does insist that Christian faith demands a different relationship to other creatures, as well as defend Christianity’s esteem for embodiment and its cosmological orientation (§§235–36). Still, the wheel turns.

What will be the effect of this authoritative lament, this earthly exhortation from the heart of an institution notorious for its contempt for nature? The text remains, of course, full of lacunae and competing impulses as the pope positions himself in an internal ecclesial battle, at the same time staking out positions that might become legible—even compelling—for those outside the Church. Yet it is in many ways innovative and excentric. Who knows what unexpected transformations, if not conversions, it might yet rouse, what new meaning and purchase—or even relational and cosmopolitical potential—such spiritual practices might achieve in the name of Francis.¹³ Perhaps, alongside other postsecular provocations, it will help to unlock possibilities and obligations hidden to scientific environmentalism and ecomodernist accelerationism. Conceivably, even those who agree with Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis in his book on anthropotechnics on “the planet of the practising” that there is no such thing as religion, only practice, “only regimens that are more and less capable and worthy of propagation”¹⁴—perhaps especially they—might find it worthwhile to give some new or old planetary practice a go. In any case, this is an intervention with which the environmental humanities must wrestle. Hence the range of engaged and illuminating responses to *Laudato si’* collected here.

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13. For some early responses, see, for example, Cobb and Castuera, *For Our Common Home*.

14. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 3.

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