



COMMENTARY

## **Laudato si' and the Postsecularism of the Environmental Humanities**

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Thomas Merton, the American intellectual turned Trappist monk, recounts in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that his conversion to Catholicism was triggered by reading an account of a sermon in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a novel that draws from Joyce's own departure from the faith. Merton fully recognizes the oddness and paradox of such a reading, but there was something, he thinks, about Joyce's fidelity to experience that allowed Joyce to transmit the consistency and force of the Catholic faith that then penetrated him as a reader. Merton writes: "There was something eminently satisfying in the thought that these Catholics knew what they believed, and knew what to teach, and all taught the same thing, and taught it with coordination and purpose and great effect. It was this that struck me first of all."<sup>1</sup>

In his paradigmatic modernist text, Joyce argues for the truthfulness of art over and against the didacticism of a sermon, and yet, paradoxically, it is his artistic rendition of that sermon that converts a lover of literature and the arts to a life of Christian monasticism. This might be a strange case of novelistic bibliomania or just a bad reading. At the very least, it signals that reading is far less linear than we ecocritics might hope. I say this because we carefully choose reading lists for our students that are intended as antidotes to environmental indifference, not to mention racism, sexism, or colonialism. And yet, to put it bluntly, we have as yet little evidence to suggest that reading "green" literature correlates to an ecological conversion and, even more importantly, to a reduction in carbon emissions. There is nothing wrong with the hope that reading might change a reader, but moral transformation through reading is indeed a hope, akin to the hope believers have in sacred texts, and not a positivist guarantee that we are what we read.

1. Merton, *Thomas Merton*, 101. And see Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*.

If Joyce's novel is paradigmatic of the modernist moment that turns us away from metaphysical confidence, Merton's strange conversion might be paradigmatic of the postsecular remainders of such a turn, remainders of which a strictly secularist account of modernity has not yet given adequate account. Merton's own insights about Joyce's remaining religious "temper" are insightful in this regard. He explains:

[Joyce] had practically no sympathy left for the Church he had abandoned: but in his intense loyalty to the vocation of artist for which he had abandoned it . . . he meant to be as accurate as he could in rebuilding his world as it truly was. . . . And it was this background [of Catholic life] that fascinated me now, along with the temper of Thomism that had once been in Joyce himself. If he had abandoned St. Thomas, he had not stepped much further down than Aristotle.<sup>2</sup>

He did not misread Joyce so much as use Joyce to reread or reimagine life; it is in the very grain of the modernist move away from the foundations of Christian faith that Merton finds inspiration to move against that grain. Surely this is not so unusual, least of all in a century that is marked by increased, not decreased, religiosity in America, notwithstanding the secularist account of literary and cultural history that has triumphantly declared the irrelevance of religion. I do not mean here to take sides in some kind of cultural or ideological war. I only mean to suggest something quite pragmatic: to the degree that environmentalism adopts a strictly secular stance and sees itself as the definitive return to earth in the wake of religion's otherworldly disinterest in the worldly, then it is limited in terms of the kind of community it can reach or create, if for no other reason than that it excludes the majority of people and cultures who are still very much embedded in and motivated by sacred traditions of reading. The religious remainders of secularism must be accounted for, and such accounting, it would seem, might begin with an acknowledgment of the ways in which the various expressions of secularism, including environmentalism—like Joyce's unacknowledged and continued debt to Aquinas—have borrowed from and continue to depend on the moral and metaphysical temper of religious discourse. Secularism is, as Charles Taylor has argued, not a radical divorce from but more often a sublimation of the religious, and as a result both the sacred and the secular have more common ground and common strategies than we might realize.<sup>3</sup>

The urgent point here is that a dismissal or willed ignorance of the continued relevance of religion and religious discourse to the quest of establishing an environmental ethos would be an utterly fatal mistake to make in the age of climate change. This is especially the case given the extraordinary developments in religiously motivated environmentalism in recent decades, the apogee of which may very well be Pope Francis's *Laudato si'*. While environmental humanists in fields such as anthropology, philosophy,

2. Merton, *Thomas Merton*, 101.

3. Taylor, *Secular Age*.

and religious studies are increasingly eager to engage the relevance of religious belief, ecocritics lag behind. Waiting for beliefs we deem problematic to go away before we can solve climate change—and I mean in particular religious and conservative beliefs assumed to make action on climate change more difficult—is certainly no simpler nor easier than trying to get rid of climate change. The questions are: How well do we know the worldviews of our students? How well can we speak their languages of understanding? What kinds of tools are we providing them to repurpose their values in light of the reality of climate change? Can we do more than act as critics? Can we also assist our students in refashioning their cosmologies to respond to climate change?

Theologian and ethicist Willis Jenkins has argued that we have expended far too much energy trying to define the “right” worldview when we ought instead to be finding ways to reinvigorate worldviews that are still operating in people’s lives, giving them the tools to make needed adaptations. We need a kind of ecumenical epistemology. He writes:

There is more explanation for the problems we face than that we are failing to live up to our beliefs or that our worldviews are corrupt. Both of those things are continually true, but problems like climate change do not reduce to justice trespassed or nature violated. . . . Agents can learn new moral competencies, I argue, by participating in projects that use their inheritances to create new responsibilities for unexpected problems.<sup>4</sup>

In practical terms, this means that ecocritics ought to start by acknowledging that the literature that most powerfully shapes attitudes and behaviors for the vast majority of humanity today comes from religious traditions and their interpretative communities. To insist that action on climate change requires an adoption of a radically new and competing worldview is to fight a losing battle. Ecocritics need to get religion, and I do not mean in the traditional sense of this turn of phrase. I mean they need to “get” it.

It is no secret, of course, that one reason for suspicion toward religion is that religious grounds for climate change denial are alive and well, especially in the United States. For example, James Inhofe’s recent book, *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*, takes its cues from the publications of the Heartland Institute, with their predictable accusations about the corruption of climate science, the looming threat of international treaties to national sovereignty, the tree-hugging and antihuman interests of secular thought, and the metastatic ambitions of liberals for big, inefficient, and freedom-killing government. However, it is also a Christian argument for a Manichean worldview that positions human well-being over and against the fate of the earth. He fondly recites the story of Noah as a reminder that “God is still up there, and He promised to maintain the seasons and that cold and heat would never cease as long as the earth remains.”<sup>5</sup> However, if Lynn White was correct in asserting

4. Jenkins, *Future of Ethics*, 5; emphasis added.

5. Inhofe, *Greatest Hoax*, 71.

that the roots of the ecological crisis are essentially religious, we ought to remember that he argued that the solution must also be religious.<sup>6</sup>

I want to suggest three brief themes in Francis's encyclical that are useful not only in reimagining Christianity's relationship to the climate crisis but also in rethinking any lingering assumptions about the secularity of the environmental humanities. The pope offers a position that blurs the distinction between the sacred and the secular and thereby redefines and expands the ethical fields of both Christian thought and secular environmentalism. It does so by a combination of simultaneous assertion and healthy self-questioning of theological conceits. He does not offer theology, in other words, as the one-time "queen of the sciences" but as a tool and partner in rethinking the meaning of human knowing, human loving, and human being in the natural world.

First, human knowing. While grounded, of course, in Catholic theology and speaking as the highest authority within the Catholic Church, Francis is also speaking as a reader and respector of the authority of science and as one moral leader among many. He notes:

Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it.<sup>7</sup>

This is an ecumenical, almost agnostic, stance in relation to epistemology that is simultaneously a call to nonbelievers and believers alike to suspend their disbelief in the face of competing cosmologies and epistemologies. I draw attention to the way this spirit of interdisciplinarity depends on a conception of the interiority, or what he here calls the spirituality, of individual human subjects. This ethic of deference, based in the theological notion of *imago dei*, starts from a position of suspension of disbelief in the face of another and motivates an ethos of collaboration and interdependence. Francis, in short, argues for respecting the *ecologies* of epistemology where different branches of knowledge intersect and interdepend and where each person and each culture assumes a knowing that is inherently valuable in the ecosystem of planetary experience. It should be obvious that this is as much a criticism of the Christian tendency to distrust or ignore science as it is of the overreach of scientism and its dismissal of religion and religious values. Respect for the ecosystems of the planet, he reminds us repeatedly, is not achievable without due respect for the dignity and diversity of all people. From a

6. White, "Historical Roots," 193.

7. Francis, *Laudato si'*, §63 (hereafter cited by section number in the text).

pragmatic point of view, then, his is an effectual ecumenical call for all voices. He then carefully denotes what he hopes is the common ground of religious perspectives: “The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity.” (§201).

Second, as this call to citizenship implies, human knowing yields to human loving, to a definition of what it is that we care and live for and why. He repeatedly argues that to love humanity is to love nature; “human beings too are creatures of this world,” he reminds us (§43). The fate of the planet, then, cannot be separated from the fate of the human family: “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (§48). To take care of the earth is also to take care of the human family, particularly those most adversely affected by the consequences of climate change: the world’s poor. We must learn, he says, “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (§49). This blurring of the distinction of the human and the more-than-human is not an uncommon strategy in much environmental thought, of course, but it is usually done in order to effectively shame the otherwise arrogant tendencies of human separation and superiority. But Francis’s argument implies that if it is biocentric to argue for our kinship with the physical world, it is also anthropocentric to now define our age as the Anthropocene. In other words, the Anthropocene is as much the great age of nature as it is the great age of the human, and that paradox has important implications:

Human beings, even if we postulate a process of evolution, also possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. Each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God himself. Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. (§81)

Agree or not with his claims about human exceptionalism and its link to the supposed necessity of God, the point I wish to make here is that he appeals to the value of human exceptionalism in Christianity—what sets us apart from evolved life—in order to direct it to the preservation of evolution’s integrity. Human exceptionalism is here marshaled for moral deliberation and action on behalf of the planet. His position is certainly no more paradoxical than a biocentrism that would appeal to our moral responsibility to care for the planet without defining or otherwise wanting to make claims about the exceptional character of such moral agency. Francis reveals the irony that biocentrists can be as queasy or reluctant to define or claim human specialness as religious believers sometimes are to accept their own biology. We need both a sense of our common kinship with the world and a sense of our human difference. Otherwise an ecological ethic is not likely:

There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then “our overall sense of responsibility wanes.” . . . Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued. (§118)

Care for the physical world, he insists, arises from a sense of responsibility that is inspired by our awareness of our special difference. In short, there is no place in his ethics for “a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures” (§68), but neither is there place for the denial of “knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility” as our unique human inheritance.

Third, human being. The aim of knowing and of loving is to become. Francis ultimately seeks what we have been after in the environmental humanities, an “ecological conversion,” except that his idea here is both earthly and spiritual, sacred and secular (§219). Ecological conversion involves a sacralization of the secular and the mundane. It means reading science with reverence, treating others with respect, and ultimately redefining who we are and where it is we find ourselves. The encyclical perhaps cannot guarantee the “right” behavior or policy outcomes for its readers any more than any other environmental literature can, but because he insists that we come to see human existence itself as infused with moral significance, he implies that an ethos should not emerge from a worldview or out of a demand for a predetermined desired policy. Instead, an ethos must be a gratuitous choice that emerges from the experience of gratitude; a sense of life as a gift inspires “generous care” and “creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the earth’s problems” (§220). And although he is clear to link the feeling of gratitude to his theology of creation, it is not limited to theology. Indeed, his notion of ecological conversion is as responsive to the environment as any ecopoetics and yet is also internally driven by a moral discipline of human appetite that shapes and directs the quality of experience. He talks of the need to appreciate “each person and each thing, learning familiarity with the simplest things and how to enjoy them” and of the practice of “shed[ding] unsatisfied needs” (§223). A simple life, shaped by a “happy sobriety,” will motivate the gratitude and service that the earth needs (§224).

He is clear that this is no facile love of nature. Indeed, he likens love of nature to love of enemies: “Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a ‘universal fraternity’” (§228). His argument here understands nature’s whims to be at least indifferent if not at times antithetical to human interests. The danger of nature is by no means new to human history, but in an age of increasingly treacherous cycles of bounty and deprivation, it is perhaps all the more crucial that we avoid any

implication that we can resolve the problem of climate change merely with more affection for nature. When biocentrism implies that love of nature will inevitably follow our discovery of and immersion in the physical world, it cannot prepare us for when nature brings death, ugliness, and suffering. In such moments, our love can turn quickly into resentment, a violent lashing out at those same facts of biology that betray us. Something akin to charity is called for, something that looks more like long-suffering and forbearance than adolescent, possessive attachment.

Francis's religious response to climate change urges consideration of the postsecularity of the environmental humanities. His ecumenism as well as his adept revisionary hermeneutics of the same texts and traditions that have often betrayed the environment ought to signal that what makes education and the arts transformative is not content; transformation is not intellectual but experiential. He is more interested in community than in conformity about empirical reality. He wants less automatism, less objectification, less consumerism, and more awe, gratitude, and wonder. It is a paradox, but what he wants in this more careful attention to physical life is a more *spiritual* existence. Which is to suggest that what motivates the environmental humanities is at its root deeply religious in its character. The word *religion* has many connotations, but its root meanings include acts that bind all things together, that imagine the world as one, and that revisit and reread for greater understanding. In this sense, it has echoes with the meaning of *repentance*—a turning around, a turning back, a resetting of things in their proper order. It also has echoes with the term *re-creation*, which we can imagine is a kind of remaking of the world, a going back—in body and in mind—to an imagined moment of creation, as if the world could always be new, again and again. This is a fiction, of course, but it is a hopeful one. The rituals of religious life, like the rituals of reading and interpreting, re-stage and reimagine the world. In this sense we can think of work in the environmental humanities as cosmological; it repurposes the chaos of each breeze, each shift in season, each death and each birth, each trace of evidence of human impact in a warming world, and converts these experiences and details into a contingent and newly ordered cosmos. Even in its despair, art and thought in the Anthropocene cannot escape the hope of these newly formed meanings. We can scarcely claim to be truly alive if we fail to participate more conscientiously and reverently in the ongoing creation of the world. Such conscientiousness, it seems, is not the fruit of new information but of a concerted practice of reinterpreting and revivifying what we thought we knew.

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