

The Development of Christian Ecotheology and the Significance of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*
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I would like to thank Dr Anselm Lam for the generous invitation to speak to you all today. It is a great honour to be invited to give this address for the Centre for Catholic Studies in Hong Kong. As the world waits with eager longing for the next major international consortium on climate change, COP21, and, I would argue, equally important conference of parties on biodiversity, COP15, the need to fuse our minds, hearts and spirits in a common quest has never been stronger. Reading the IPCC 'Code red' reports ramps up the sense of urgency- but also potentially anxiety and fear. If we don't learn to collaborate and work together as a world community, our common future looks bleak. Ecologists have been alerting us to this issue for over half a century. A significant proportion of Christian theologians have also kept in step with the science, at least those who have been most aware of the social and ethical issues of our time. Religious insight is vital if we are to have the inner resources to face global calamity and the wisdom to know how best to act.

The development of Christian theology in the West has taken a slightly different form within Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, and within the Eastern Orthodox traditions, but all, I would argue, have been alert to the issues at hand, and in the Catholic tradition in particular, the global nature of the need to respond has become even more pressing, not least because of Pope Francis' watershed encyclical published in 2015. I suggest that all strands of Christian ecotheology are necessary in order to find a common way forward across different traditions. Pope Francis takes another bold step and encourages dialogue between religions, including indigenous traditions, as part of the way forward. For wisdom is a common search, and 'no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out'¹.

Within the Protestant traditions the early development of ecotheology was marked by the publication of Lynn White's critique of Western styles of Christianity. His accusation was that Christianity, as it had developed in the West, was the 'most anthropocentric religion the world had ever seen.'² Protestant theologians were alerted to his position because he identified the root cause of a negative attitude towards the created world from an interpretation of Genesis 1.28 in terms of human domination of the earth. Many Protestants rejected that interpretation as valid biblical exegesis, though other historians³ have acknowledged that understanding dominion over the earth as a licence for human domination over it is a reasonable interpretation of at least some branches of Christianity. As I will show later, Catholic theology was among such branches too, it was not just confined to Calvinist traditions. The tension between maintaining a strong sense of human dignity and allowing that to slip into dominating attitudes towards other creatures is an ever present one, even in current thinking.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which has championed the need to respect the natural world through the leadership of the ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew I, takes a rather different approach⁴. Rather than a defensive attitude against accusations of blame, as in Protestant traditions responding to Lynn White, Orthodox approaches understand the need for a deeper metanoia or conversion away from patterns of unbridled consumption and consumerism towards a discovery of the place of creation in the divine liturgy. We are part of and yet also integral to the created natural world that reflects something of the glory of God. Such celebration of creation has been integral to the life of the early church for centuries. Ecological

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015) §63

² Lynn White, *Science*, 155 (3767) 10th March 1967, 1203-1207.

³ See Peter Harrison, 'Having Dominion: Genesis and the Mastery of Nature' in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives - Past and Present*, Berry, R.J. (ed) (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), pp. 17-30.

⁴ The Ecumenical Patriarchate, *Orthodoxy and the Ecological Crisis* (London: WWF, 1990).

conversion is therefore not so much something new as a discovery of what is already there in the tradition.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition there have been two main developments. First, the more radical feminist writers pioneered eco-feminist approaches along with other secular feminist scholars. For authors such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, the issue was not just about human exploitation of the earth, but the suppression of women as well. The two were intersectional. Other prominent Protestant scholars including Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague and Heather Eaton, for example, in their various ways drew on different philosophical and religious strands in order to press for social and ecological change as bound up with theological renewal.

The second strand, and one that I will give most attention to today, is that of Catholic social teaching, since it is from understanding this context that the emergence of Pope Francis' encyclical makes most sense. The first inkling of ecological awareness in is the writing of Pope Paul VI and his Apostolic Letter of May 14th 1971, *Octogesima Adveniens*, dedicated to the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.⁵ While focusing most on social problems of urbanisation, environmental issues are described as 'the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity', which amounts to an 'ill-considered exploitation of nature'. He recognises the clear risk of humanity destroying the natural world as well as human beings becoming 'the victim of this degradation', so that 'the human framework is no longer under man's control'.⁶ At this stage there is little discussion of the theological basis of this concern. The World Synod of Catholic Bishops in Australia *Justitia in Mundo* (1971) blamed the richer nations of the world, both capitalist and socialist for environmental degradation.⁷ They call for a simpler life, less waste, to avoid the destruction of the earth, seen as a common heritage for all humanity.⁸ Romans 8 links the suffering of creation and the vocation of Christians to bring about a better world, reflecting the fullness of creation.⁹

But the credit for laying a firmer theological foundation for environmental concern in Roman Catholic social teaching must be given to Pope John Paul II who, from his very first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, written in 1979, showed an acute awareness of the importance of ecological concern. Early on in this text he takes the profound step of linking the original creation with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, so that Christ acts to restore not simply broken humanity, but a broken earth as well. So, 'In Jesus Christ the visible world which God created for man- the world that, when sin entered, "was subject to futility"- recovers again its original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love.'¹⁰ He adopts, then, a *Christological mandate* to restore not just a broken humanity, in all its social dimensions, but a broken natural world as well. It reflects, in other words, what might be termed a cosmic Christology, or what some contemporary theologians have termed, deep incarnation.¹¹ It is naming a broken ecology as an aspect of other social injustices that perhaps marks out its distinctive contribution.

Redemptor hominis also enlarges on how we need to understand right relationships, what dominion over the earth should entail. This is a mandate given to both men and women together, as made in the image of God, drawing on the Genesis text.¹² Yet he still takes the command for humanity to 'subdue' the earth seriously, but now it is mirrored after the pattern of

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html.

⁶ *Octogesima Adveniens*, §21

⁷ World Synod of Catholic Bishops in Australia, *Justitia in Mundo*, § 11, http://catholicsocialservices.org.au/Catholic_Social_Teaching/Justitia_in_Mundo, accessed August 4th, 2011.

⁸ *Justitia in Mundo*, § 70

⁹ *Justitia in Mundo*, §75, 77.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §8. <http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0218/INDEX.HTM>, accessed April 13th, 2011.

¹¹ Denis Edwards, such as his *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006) 6

¹² *Redemptor Hominis*, §9.

Christ's kingship, which consists in 'the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter'.¹³ He offers a radical criticism of the financial and political systems of the day, viewing them as not solving global problems, but instead contributing to a deepening of environmental damage.¹⁴ *Laborem Exercens* (1981) develops the idea of human subjugation further, not to mean exploitation, but rather in 'justice and holiness' in order to glorify God, comparing the image bearing capacity of human beings with the activity of God as Creator.¹⁵ This optimistic view of human capabilities also finds an echo in *Laudato Si'*

Sollicitudo rei socialis (1987) begins to weave in concepts such as 'superdevelopment' where goods are used to excess, embedded in 'structures of sin' that discriminated most against the newly developing nations.¹⁶ The notion of humanity expressing image bearing in its environmental responsibility becomes stronger here, for it is the *very means through which humans become perfect* and express the image of God. Here we find a theological anthropology that is grounded in the way we treat the natural world, the special *task* assigned to humanity, using texts from Genesis as well as Wisdom 9.2-3. *Centesimus Annus* (1991) introduces the idea of the earth as God's *gift* to the *whole* human race without discrimination, thus providing the ontological foundation for the idea of the common good.¹⁷ Here we find John Paul II speaking of the need to develop *human ecology* to stress the *ontological* conditions needed for human flourishing.

Pope Benedict XVI's World Day of Peace message of 2007, cites *Centesimus Annus* in affirming an ecology of nature existing alongside a "human" ecology, which in turn demands a "social" ecology.¹⁸ Ecological conversion when first used by Pope John Paul II in 2001 in an address to a general audience in St Peter's Square, seems to refer to the *general* trend towards greater environmental awareness in the light of ecological problems. By the time of The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (2003), the term ecological conversion takes on more explicitly theological elements, interpreted as stewardship. The influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew I, is reflected in a number of joint statements, such that ecological conversion also means conversion in Christ which 'will enable us to change the way we think and act'¹⁹ Pope John Paul II's also touches on a link between mercy to the natural world as well inter-human relationships.²⁰

Charting the development of Catholic social teaching and its specific understanding of the significance of ecological relationships also weaves in issues of global peace and justice making especially through the World Day Messages of Peace, beginning in 1990 with Pope John Paul II's *Peace with All Creation* and continuing with Pope Francis' exhortations. The consistent message in these documents is the linking of right relationship with God and proper care of creation with global security and *vice versa*. Pope John Paul II also highlights the *aesthetic* value of the natural world as a means for peace, so: 'Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity'²¹ Benedict XVI brings in

¹³ *Redemptor Hominis*, §16.

¹⁴ *Redemptor Hominis*, §15.

¹⁵ *Laborem Exercens*, §25.

¹⁶ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §28. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003).

¹⁷ *Centesimus Annus* §31. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html, accessed April 11th, 2011.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, World Day Message of Peace, 2007.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20061208_xl-world-day-peace_en.html, accessed April 11th, 2011.

¹⁹ Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew 1, June 10th, 2002. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration_en.html accessed June 15th, 2007, also reprinted with commentary in C.Deane-Drummond, *Seeds of Hope: Facing the Challenge of Climate Justice* (London: CAFOD, 2009), pp. 152-55.

²⁰ *Dives in Misericordia* (1980)§2. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia_en.html, accessed April 12th 2011.

²¹ *Peace With All Creation*, §14.

the importance of ‘intergenerational solidarity’. So, ‘*The ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity which embraces time and space*²². The quest for world-wide authentic solidarity ‘inspired by the values of charity, justice and the common good’ marks out for Benedict XVI the *deepest* motivation for getting involved in tackling environmental problems. In other words, the rationale for dealing with environmental issues relates ultimately to issues of social justice.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* is therefore not so much new Catholic teaching, but more the bringing in of previous strands of that thought into a new focus. There are, however, distinct elements that I will highlight today. One of the first aspects to note is his political acumen, delaying the release of the encyclical until just prior to the Paris COP in 2015 and the release of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Unlike other encyclicals, Pope Francis is bold in his citation and use of science and scientific arguments to support his case. His *Laudato Si’* encyclical has been cited by more scientists than any other encyclical before or since. He both opens up his plea to those of different religious traditions and none, while also adding strength to the Catholic and theological mandate for care for creation and its peoples. Drawing on insights from Francis of Assisi, whose name marks out the style of his pontificate, and indeed the content of the encyclical which takes inspiration from Francis of Assisi’s praise poem to the earth, creation is the order of love and grounded in love of Creator. “For you love all things that exist and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it” (*Wis* 11:24).²³

The pattern of the encyclical also takes the form of ‘see’, ‘judge’, then ‘act’ in a way characteristic of liberation forms of theology, particularly arising from the context of South America. The first section of the encyclical about what we need to ‘see’ is on listening to the cry of the earth and also that of the poorest of the poor. Weaving these two threads together is not unusual, this has been characteristic of Catholic social teaching since the 1970s, what is distinct is the way Pope Francis brings in far more concrete examples and explicit data on science in order to support his case. The ‘judge’ aspect is primarily one that arises from a theological judgment on both discovering a theological vision of the natural world, and recognising that abuse of creation is an ecological sin. The crisis, therefore, is not just a natural crisis, but arises from the way humanity has treated the natural world. Such perspectives reflect previous Catholic social thought, but becomes more explicit, moving from the margins of the discussion to the centre. A new dimension in Pope Francis’ analysis is his understanding that humanity has become too wedded, in his thinking, to a technological paradigm that undercuts healthy human relationships and assumes that technological solutions will provide all the answers to our human problems²⁴. As he moves into the third section on how to act, he weaves in an important concept, namely, that of integral ecology. Ecological conversion is about embracing a new integral ecological paradigm instead of a technological one. That does not mean that he rejects science and technology, but rather it is about recognising its limits and thinking holistically. I will return to the idea of integral ecology again below, but just to note that it is followed soon after by practically orientated sections on (1) dwelling in our common home, (2) developing a new ecological citizenship, (3) embracing an ecological spirituality, and (4) cultivating ecological virtues. Far more than other papal statements, Pope Francis spells out both the seriousness of the sin, where to find the theological resources to make the changes that need to be made, and practical suggestions and ways forward.

Sometimes integral ecology in Pope Francis has been interpreted as a way of envisaging ‘joined up thinking’ between the social and ecological aspects of the problems that we are facing as a global community. However, Pope Francis intends integral ecology to be the paradigm that replaces the technological one. It therefore includes theological dimensions as well, which

²² *World Day Message of Peace*, 2010, §8.

²³ LS §77.

²⁴ For his critique of technology, he draws on Romano Guardini’s text, *The End of the Modern World* (*Laudato Si’* §105).

means both traditional teaching noted earlier, and openness to other religious traditions. Interconnectedness is of course crucial to his understanding of integral ecology, but it is a fundamental ontological change in orientation that he is pressing for, and not just superficial changes. The theme of interconnectedness does not suddenly show up in the fourth chapter of the encyclical. If we just read that then we miss how it has been building a thread through the whole document. Even the first chapter stresses ‘the conviction that everything in the world is connected’ and this comes from the book of Genesis²⁵). This is not a new invention of ecology, so ‘these ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others’ (§70). Weaving together human and social dimensions while retaining a strong sense of human dignity are fundamental. This is not just a ‘turn to nature’, but a different way of viewing who we are as human beings, a new anthropology. In this view ‘human beings are not completely autonomous.’²⁶ Human beings *depend on well-functioning ecologies*: one cannot be considered without the other. The structural aspects of this are important, so ‘the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life’.²⁷ Examples include issues like drug abuse fuelling importation of products from poorer regions where lives are destroyed as a result.

Global problems also require global and collective action, which is one reason why Pope Francis is intending to come in person to the Glasgow COP 26 in Scotland this year as well. And woven into the idea of integral ecology is an acknowledgement that technologies or sciences that are just focused on single problem issues will not work. This is what Pope Francis means by ‘reductive epistemologies’ arising out of a fragmentation of knowledge.²⁸ What is needed is an integral approach to problems that combine insights from all branches of knowledge. As in Pope Benedict XVI, he recognises the need to acknowledge our lives as gift which then leads to a recognition of all life, and the life of the earth as gift as well, so ‘The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation.’²⁹

An integral approach tries to see a holistic approach to the challenges, rather than an atomistic one, hence, ‘Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society’.³⁰ The *social dimensions* of integral ecology means that protection of our common home is not distanced from other social concerns including economy and the political life.³¹ Bringing together social, economic, ecological, spiritual aspects of the problem in a holistic way is no easy task, but Pope Francis reminds the global community that indigenous communities can be exemplars and so provide ‘principal dialogue partners’.³²

Integral ecology means new ways to think through economics and governance that are ecologically attuned, a circular economy or ecological economy, but also different ways to consider finance, governance and structures of the institutions that we are part of. If integral ecology is to have any bite, it needs to work all the way down, from international, to national to corporate governance and not just be restricted to individual projects, however worthy they may be. It is not enough, then to rely on an individual sense of responsibility, though this is a good start. What needs to change, and change fast, are the structures in which human society is

²⁵ LS §16.

²⁶ LS §105.

²⁷ LS §142.

²⁸ LS §63.

²⁹ LS §155.

³⁰ LS §91.

³¹ LS §139.

³² LS §146.

embedded. Those who have the power to make such changes are therefore shouldered with a huge responsibility, not just in aligning their own individual lifestyle to be in tune with integral ecology, but the specific governance issues of the organization and its strategies for development.

Integral ecology then also means thinking through from ‘cradle to grave’ exactly what is being done at each level of organization, a joining up of the dots so that the strategy matches the message. It is about, I think, an organization having integrity. An institution cannot authentically preach on the need for change if it does not implement an integral approach to its own governance, financial investment, practices leading to a model of different structures that reflect the message of *Laudato si’*.

To sum up: Pope Francis has given the world a message that has resonance not just for 2015, but longer term than this, for new ways to conceive of and practice Christian and Catholic faith. As he points out poignantly, ‘Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience’.³³ The challenge for all of us is to find ways to think and live out this message not just as individuals, but as institutions, societies and as a global world.

Thank you for listening

³³ LS §217.