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For Our Common Home

PROCESS-RELATIONAL RESPONSES TO *LAUDATO SI'*

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Stewardship and the Roots of the Ecological Crisis

Brian Henning

In 1967 the historian Lynn White, Jr. published in the journal *Science* a controversial essay exploring "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." His contention is that the roots of the crisis, a crisis that was even then apparent, run deeper than the rise of modern science and technology. The Baconian quest to master and violently subdue nature was, he argues, only possible because of an underlying anthropocentric worldview which made such possibilities live. That worldview, White argues, can be traced to a particular dominant form of Western Christianity that "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[1] Western Christianity bifurcated nature, setting humans above the rest of creation. The world is merely a stage on which to play out humanity's quest for salvation. The play of life is for and about humans. "Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim."[2] "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen."[3]

White's contention is that this underlying worldview created the conditions necessary for the possibility of the violent misuse of nature.

Note that his thesis is not dependent on showing the callousness of Christians. Rather, his claim is that the basic Christian worldview is now inseparable from the Western mindset and is appropriated independently of any religious belief. "Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."[4] Given this diagnosis, White's point is to demonstrate that without a more adequate worldview, the ecological crisis will have no solution. "What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."[5]

Importantly, White's goal is not to contend that Christianity is an *inherently* flawed worldview that must be abandoned. Rather, he suggests that within its own tradition there are resources for "rethinking." Specifically, White suggests that Western Christianity might overcome its dualistic narrative if it gave greater status to the views of St. Francis.

> Possibly we should ponder the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ: Saint Francis of Assisi. The prime miracle of Saint Francis is the fact that he did not end at the stake, as many of his left-wing followers did. . . . The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility—not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.[6]

> We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direct. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.[7]

My goal in this brief essay is not so much to defend White's controversial thesis,[8] but to use it as a context for appreciating the significance of Pope Francis' new encyclical *Laudato si'*. Considering it in the context of White's thesis will bring certain salient features into relief.

First, it is interesting to note that much of what White suggested by way of rethinking Chritianity has come to pass in the last half century. For instance, though due in no part to White, in 1979 Pope John Paul II did in fact make St. Francis the patron saint of ecology. Beyond this symbolic act, the Catholic Church's explicit discussion of the ecological crisis as a moral issue demanding serious consideration by all people of good faith begins with Pope John Paul II's 1990 world peace day speech, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility."

> In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of *due respect for nature*, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty.[9]

In this moving account, John Paul II begins to lay the foundation for connecting social and environmental justice, recognizing not only that harm to the environment disproportionately affects the poor, and that justice entails right relation not only between humans and their creator, but also necessarily between humans and creation. Furthermore, he recognizes that a consistent "ethic of life" must respect not only human life, but also nonhuman life. Finally, like White, John Paul argues that the ecological crisis is not a problem to be "managed" by the application of more science and technology. John Paul contends that the ecological crisis is ultimately "a moral problem." In this way he seems to agree that the ecological crisis is a manifestation of an inadequate worldview and that unless and until a more adequate conception of ourselves and our relationship to the natural world is conceived, the crisis will only worsen. This reaction went a great distance in affecting the "rethinking" called for by White. It reinterpreted human dominion of the Earth from despotic

tyranny to benign stewardship. Humans being uniquely made in God's image now entails responsibilities more than privileges.

Though a dramatic and welcome shift in teaching, these statements often stopped short of recognizing that the nonhuman world has intrinsic value and is deserving of respect for its own sake. Some within the Catholic Church were concerned that recognizing the intrinsic value of nature would encourage misguided pantheistic worship of nature. The obligation to be good stewards of creation was ultimately owed to the creator and to present and future humans, but never to plants, animals, or ecosystems for their own sakes. Duties to nonhumans were left merely indirect. In this way, one might say that the Catholic Church shifted from the self-destructive anthropocentrism White discusses, to a more enlightened anthropocentrism. Whatever the reason, the Church's views had changed dramatically but had not yet abandoned the dualism which, according to White, is at the root of the ecological crisis. Though Francis had been named the patron saint of ecology, his democracy of fellow creatures was still excluded in favor of St. Thomas' Aristotelian-inspired *scala natura*. Despite now recognizing our dependence on the natural world and the need to respect its "integrity," humans are still set off from and above the natural world.

This hesitation to recognize the intrinsic value of all beings, human and nonhuman, has with Pope Francis finally been resolved. In his new encyclical, *Laudato si'*, he consistently and even emphatically recognizes that nonhuman organisms must be taken into account "not only to determine how best to use them, but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system" (140). Indeed, not only does he recognize that individual organisms have intrinsic value, but also the systems of which they are a part have value. In this encyclical Francis has for the first time unequivocally repudiated anthropocentrism and recognized that the natural world has value independent of its usefulness to human beings and deserves to be respected and protected not only for the sake of present and future humans, but also for its own sake. Nonhumans are

owed both direct and indirect duties. Yet Francis is also quick to note that this should not be taken to imply a leveling "biocentrism."

> A misguided anthropocentrism need not necessarily yield to "biocentrism," for that would entail adding yet another imbalance, failing to solve present problems and adding new ones. 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)

Here we see Francis trying to be clear that in rejecting anthropocentrism he is not "yielding" to a biocentrism—or, he might have added, an ecocentrism. However, this position incorrectly assumes that "biocentrism" necessarily entails a flat or egalitarian axiology in which all beings are of equal value. Environmental ethicists are careful to maintain the distinction between moral considerability and moral status. Biocentrism is simply the view that if a being is living, then it is intrinsically valuable and deserves moral consideration for its own sake. Whether all living beings are *equal* in intrinsic value—have the same moral status—is a related, but distinct question, answered differently by different thinkers. In other words, Francis' target seems to be egalitarian forms of biocentrism that claim all living beings have value *and have it equally*. However, there are many non-egalitarian forms of biocentrism which claim that *all living beings are equal in having value, but not all have value equally.*

For instance, Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" ethic is perhaps among the most eloquent, though also the least systematically developed, versions of biocentrism. "Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practising the same reverence for life toward all will-to-live, as toward my own. Therein I have already the needed fundamental principle of morality. It is good to maintain and cherish life; it is evil to destroy and to check life."[10] At times, Schweitzer seems committed to an egalitarian form of biocentrism, arguing that "life as such is sacred. He [the ethical person] shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush any insect as he walks." However, even this view need not imply a leveling axiological egalitarianism. Schweitzer recognizes that

the "will-to-live" is in some ways "at variance with itself. One existence survives at the expense of another of which it yet knows nothing." Our moral obligation, Schweitzer contends, is to avoid injuring life "without being forced to do so by necessity."What is perhaps left ambiguous in Schweitzer is clarified in prominent proponents of biocentrism, such as the environmental ethicist Gary Varner, who explicitly defend a form of "biocentric individualism" grounded in an axiological hierarchy. [11] Biocentrism is fully compatible with a hierarchical conception of value.

Though the term is not mentioned by Francis, a similar analysis could be produced for "ecocentrism," which goes beyond biocentrism and also recognizes the intrinsic value of not only individual living beings, but also the systems of which they are a part. Indeed, though Francis does not use the term, he does seem to embrace a form of ecocentrism: "Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system" (140). There are indeed some ecocentrists, such as the Sessions and Devall, who defend an "ecological egalitarianism" in which all beings are "in principle" equal in value.[12] However, there are others, such as Holmes Rolston, who defend a hierarchical form of ecocentrism that readily acknolwedges differences in degrees of value.[13] Perhaps the most expansive form of non-egalitarian ecocentrism is that grounded in the work of Alfred North Whitehead, who recognizes that everything in the universe has value for itself, for others, and for the whole.[14] The scope of our direct moral consideration excludes nothing. Everything has intrinsic value, but there are many degrees and grades of value achieved by different beings and the systems of which they are a part. Much of my own professional work has been dedicated to exploring the development of an ethic grounded in such a worldview.[15]

I belabor this discussion of biocentrism and ecocentrism in order to demonstrate that, contrary to Pope Francis' impression, there is no incompatibility between a thoroughgoing biocentrism or even an ecocentrism and a recognition of humans' "unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility" (118). The repudiation of anthropocentrism need not entail a great leveling that fails to recognize the real differences between different beings. A genuine biocentrism or

ecocentrism is not only compatible with Pope Francis' call to shed an arrogant, unjustified anthropocentrism, but a resource.

In explicitly repudiating anthropocentrism and recognizing the intrinsic value of a world that deserves respect and protection for its own sake, Francis has in fact addressed White's most basic concern that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[16] Francis is unequivocal in rejecting the insidious dualism which grounded our unjustified anthropocentrism. "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (139). Indeed, Francis explicitly recognizes that, as White contended, too often Christians have misunderstood the nature of their "dominion."

> Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the Earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. (67)

> An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship. (116)

Pope Francis's explicit embrace of a stewardship ethic is a welcome development. However, I fear that stewardship, taken out of the context of the encyclical as a whole, is likely to be misunderstood. The metaphor of stewardship rightly challenges the notion that the Earth is "ours," to be disposed at our lordly whim. Stewardship is always on behalf of another.[17] As stewards we are entrusted with responsibility for, not possession of, the Earth. We are stewards on behalf of the creator, and on behalf of future generations.

So far as this goes, it is a dramatic improvement. However, there is a danger latent within this metaphor. Too often it simply packages in a new form an unjustified anthropocentrism. A benign anthropocentrism, perhaps, but unjustified all the same. The evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould notes well the potentially problematic nature of the metaphor of stewardship

> Such views [of stewardship], however well intentioned, are rooted in the old sin of pride and exaggerated self-importance. We are one among millions of species, stewards of nothing. By what argument could we, arising just a geological microsecond ago, become responsible for the affairs of a world 4.5 billion years old, teeming with life that has been evolving and diversifying for at least three-quarters of that immense span?[18]

If one is not careful, stewardship simply becomes an extension of the "Promethean vision of mastery over the world" (116). This is to commit the sins of hubris and conceit. Nature does not need a benevolent caretaker to ensure its proper functioning; it does not need fixing. It has its own integral unity which, if allowed to flourish, functions quite well.

Fortunately, if taken in the context of the encyclical as a whole, it becomes clear that Pope Francis' conception of stewardship is more expansive than this. Stewardship is not akin to the sustainability movement, which too often is solely aimed at making sustainable a consumer lifestyle that robs from the poor even while it fails to satisfy those who are fortunate enough to have the resources to pursue it. Though less polluting forms of technology are needed, the ecological crisis is not a technical problem to be managed through the development of new technologies. The ecological crisis is, at root, an ethical and spiritual problem "which require[s] that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms" (9).

The shift to an ethic of stewardship properly understood entails more that human beings reenvision themselves and their place in the natural world. Put differently, we are called to be stewards of ourselves, not of nature. We are not in charge of nature and our attempts to do so usually create more harm than good. Pope Francis' conception of stewardship is

far more radical than it might first appear. "It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress" (194). To become good stewards is to become good stewards of ourselves, to devise ways of living that are in harmony with and respectful of the other beautiful forms of life on the planet. The great Catholic priest and cultural historian Thomas Berry described this task as the "Great Work" of this generation.

> The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.[19]

Whether the roots of the ecological crisis can be traced to Western Christianity (as Lynn White claims) or to modernity (as Pope Francis contends), both seem to be in agreement that the ecological crisis is ultimately a moral and spiritual problem that can only be addressed by embracing a worldview that repudiates an unjustified and arrogant anthropocentrism that separates us from and makes us contemptuous of nature. We must recognize that, although humans are truly amazing in their capabilities, we are fundamentally a part and product of the natural world and that, as intrinsically beautiful and valuable, every being deserves moral respect and appreciation. Pope Francis' encyclical is a clarion call to take up the Great Work before us.

> If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled. (11)

Endnotes

1. Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, (1967): 1205.

2. Ibid., 1206.

3. Ibid., 1205.

4. Ibid., 1207.

5. Ibid., 1206.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 1207.

8. For critical analyses of White's thesis, consult Robin Attfield, "Social History, Religion, and Technology: An Interdisciplinary Investigation into Lynn White's 'Roots'," E*nvironmental Ethics* 31, (2009) and Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History," *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 2 (1993): 151-69.

9. John Paul, II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," 1 January 1990 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html>.

10. Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethic of Reverence for Life," trans. John Naish <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-c/schweitzer01.htm>.

11. See Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests? Interests, Animal Rights, and Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

12. Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985).

13. Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1988).

14. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1938), 111.

15. My most systematic attempt to develop a Whiteheadian inspired moral philosophy is in Brian G. Henning, *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). Other relevant work on this can be found in Brian G. Henning, *Riders in the Storm: Ethics in an Age of Climate Change* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015); Brian G. Henning, *Beyond*

Mechanism: Putting Life Back into Biology, eds. Brian G. Henning and Adam C. Scarfe (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Brian G. Henning, "From Despot to Steward: The Greening of Catholic Social Teaching," in the *Heart of Catholic Social Teaching: Its Origins and Contemporary Significance,* ed. David Matzko McCarthy (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 183-94; and Brian G. Henning, "Trusting in the 'Efficacy of Beauty': A Kalocentric Approach to Moral Philosophy," *Ethics & the Environment* 14.1 (2009): 101-28.

16. White, 1207.

17. For a more developed discussion of this point, see chapter 5 of Brian G. Henning, *Riders in the Storm: Ethics in an Age of Climate Change* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015). See also, Robin Attfield, ""Trustees of the Planet," in the *Ethics of the Global Environment* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999), 44-61.

18. Stephen Jay, Gould, "The Golden Rule: A Proper Scale for our Environmental Crisis," *Natural History* 99.9 (1990): 24.

19. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 3.