

## Working Paper

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# Laudato Si and the Role of Religion in Shaping Humanity's Response to Climate Change

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***Laudato Si'* and the Role of Religion in Shaping Humanity's Response to Climate Change**

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## Key Concepts:

- Religion is a critical motivator for action on climate change. When people hear the message to protect the environment from the church, mosque, synagogue or temple, it will have far more power to motivate action than a regulatory or economic message ever will. Against such a moral backdrop, the very call to “make the business case to protect the global climate” seems rather absurd
- The Pope, through his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, can reach segments of the public that the three primary messengers on climate change – environmentalists, Democratic politicians and scientists – cannot.
- The Pope’s message can give political cover for emerging Republicans to upend the notion that you can’t be a conservative and believe in climate change, or that you can’t believe in God and believe in climate change.
- In *Laudato Si'*, the Pope is challenging centuries old interpretations of biblical theology – such as misinterpretations of the Genesis mandate – as well as calling for new forms of economic, civic and political action as being consistent with moral responsibility.
- In the end, *Laudato Si'* is a response to the unprecedented challenges that we now face in the Anthropocene Era, calling for a new set of values and beliefs about our relationship with the environment, with each other and for many, with God.

**Summary:** There are many ways in which people have sought to make climate change personally salient and actionable through self-interest, such as national security and human health. But the Pope’s recent encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'* has elevated the importance of religious morality as a motivator. It’s a bold appeal to reevaluate our worldviews, values and spiritual beliefs and elevate climate change and the broad sweep of environmental issues beyond that of strictly an “environmental issue,” a label that has ghettoized the issue as one that is associated with a liberal environmental movement. When people hear the message to address climate change and protect the environment from the church, mosque, synagogue or temple, it will have far more power to motivate action than a regulatory or economic message ever will. Religion, unlike any other institutional force in society, has the power to directly influence our values and beliefs. And at this particular moment in our human existence on earth – the epoch of the Anthropocene – this religious voice is all the more important. A proper response to the Anthropocene Era calls for a new set of values and beliefs about our relationship with the environment, with each other and for many, with God.

In 1949, conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote that no important change in our ethical appreciation of nature could ever be accomplished “without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, the Pope’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si’ or On Care for Our Common Home*<sup>2</sup> is correcting that oversight, taking concern for the environment and climate change to the level of religious faith.<sup>3</sup> This adds to the ongoing efforts to connect climate change to concerns for national security,<sup>4</sup> economic competitiveness,<sup>5</sup> and human health,<sup>6</sup> which can convince people to protect nature through self-interest, financial incentives and pragmatic reasons. But a connection to religious beliefs compels us to act for reasons that go far beyond our narrow personal interests and evoke words like sacred, divine, reverence and love. If his message truly takes hold, it will make the issue personally salient in ways that go far deeper than other attempts to stir attention and spur action. When people hear the message to address climate change and protect the environment from the church, mosque, synagogue or temple, it will have far more power to motivate action than a regulatory or economic message ever will. Religion, unlike any other institutional force in society, has the power to directly influence our values and beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Core Religious Message**

Pope Francis lays blame for our ecological crisis on rampant consumerism, unrestrained faith in technology, blind pursuit of profits, political shortsightedness and the economic inequalities that force the world’s poor to bear the brunt of an imbalanced system. His message calls for us to “promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.” It’s a bold appeal to reevaluate our worldviews, values and spiritual beliefs and elevate climate change and the broad sweep of environmental issues beyond that of strictly an “environmental issue,” a label that has ghettoized the issue as one that is associated with a liberal environmental movement and all the cultural and political baggage that accompanies such a label.

Instead, the Pope is framing climate change as an issue of social equity. We live in a world where the richest 20% of the world's population (namely us) consume 86% of all goods and services, while the poorest 20% consume just 1.3%.<sup>8</sup> And yet, it is these poor people that will bear the brunt of the environmental impacts of climate change. It is not a giant leap to connect these injustices with a call to act on climate change to fulfill and enact our religious beliefs and the dignity of all humankind, not just the affluent few. Against such a moral backdrop, the very call to "make the business case to protect the global climate" – a common tactic to argue for action on climate change – seems rather absurd.

### **Reexamining Sacred Texts: The Genesis Mandate**

Pope Francis calls for a reexamination of the meaning of "stewardship" within the book of Genesis and what it means to have dominion over nature. This has been a much-debated and contested issue, one that exploded in 1967 when Lynn White wrote that our ecological problems derive from "Christian attitudes towards man's relation to nature," which lead us to think of ourselves as "superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim." He doubted that changes in those attitudes could occur unless, first, "orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature" were somehow dispelled and, secondly, we move beyond that idea that science and technology alone can solve our "ecological crisis."<sup>9</sup>

In *Laudato Si'*, the Pope offers a revised view, writing that our interpretation of dominion "is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church." Instead, he writes that the Bible teaches human beings to "till and keep" the garden of the world, where "'tilling' refers to cultivating, plowing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving." In 1991, Pope John Paul II offered a similarly provocative counterpoint to the widely accepted view of man's domination of nature in his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* or *Hundredth Year*: "Man thinks he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray."<sup>10</sup> But unlike his predecessor, Pope Francis has elevated concern for the environment in an encyclical letter all its own.

## **The Messenger is as Important as the Message**

The public debate over climate change today has been caught up in the so-called “culture wars”<sup>11</sup> where the majority of Democrats believe in climate change and the majority of Republicans do not.<sup>12</sup> In explaining this divide, research shows that we openly consider evidence when it is accepted or ideally presented by sources that represent our cultural community, and we dismiss information that is advocated by sources that represent groups whose values we reject.<sup>13</sup>

As such, the Pope can reach segments of the public that the three primary messengers on climate change – environmentalists, Democratic politicians and scientists – cannot.<sup>14</sup> First, the Pope can reach the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics with an unmatched power to convince and motivate. And it would appear that Catholics are a receptive audience. According to a survey by the Yale Project on Climate Communication, a solid majority of Catholics (70%) think that global warming is happening and 48% think it is caused by humans, compared with only 57% and 35% of non-Catholic Christians respectively.<sup>15</sup>

But the Pope’s reach extends far beyond his Catholic followers. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that the Pope is extremely popular with both Catholics and non-Catholics. Americans are particularly fond of Pope Francis, with more than three-quarters (78%) giving him positive marks. In Europe, Catholics and non-Catholics view the Pope with very similar acclaim.<sup>16</sup>

## **An Ecumenical Response to a Catholic Message**

The Pope’s message is calling attention to the ongoing efforts of religious environmental groups (such as Interfaith Power and Light, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, the Catholic Climate Covenant, GreenFaith and others) and leaders in other denominations, notably Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Church, nicknamed the “Green Patriarch,” who has been calling out the “sin” of environmental degradation for years.<sup>17</sup> But his message is prompting responses from representatives of other denominations as well.

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences drafted a declaration on climate change that mirrors many of the encyclical's key messages. The declaration ends with a call to action for Muslims everywhere to play a role in tackling climate change – and calls on other faith and religious groups to join in the effort.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, more than 300 Jewish rabbis signed a rabbinic letter on the climate crisis, calling for vigorous action to prevent worsening climate disruption and to seek "eco-social justice."<sup>19</sup> The Dalai Lama has publicly endorsed the Pope's encyclical, calling it "wonderful," and asking his fellow Buddhists, as well as all people, to "say more. We have to make more of an effort, including demonstrations."<sup>20</sup> He suggested that tackling climate change may be better led by a religious coalition than a political one stating, "Countries think about their own national interest rather than global interests and that needs to change because the environment is a global issue."<sup>21</sup>

### **Changing the Debate**

More than asking people to adjust their beliefs, *Laudato Si'* is quite explicit in its call for changes in our behavior. For example, the letter calls on people to change their consuming and purchasing behavior, pointing out that "A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment. There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions." Going further, the letter advocates for consumers to "bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. This is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production. When social pressure affects their earnings, businesses clearly have to find ways to produce differently. This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers."

Finally, the letter seeks change within our political system, stating that "Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world." To that point, the 114th Congress has 138 Catholic Congressman (70 of whom are Republican) and 26 Catholic Senators (11 of whom are

Republicans).<sup>22</sup> Those 81 Republicans have followed the party lead in rejecting the scientific consensus on climate change, not always because of the scientific evidence, but rather by yielding to party politics.<sup>23</sup> But the Pope's message can give political cover for emerging Republicans to upend the notion that you can't be a conservative and believe in climate change (or the notion that you can't believe in God and believe in climate change, an argument that Rush Limbaugh and others have tried to make). In particular, it may shift the presidential debate on climate change. Already, we can see signs of the quandary that Pope's message creates for religiously inspired political candidates. For example, when Presidential Candidate Jeb Bush said in 2009 that you can't put your "faith in a safety deposit box until you finish your service as a public servant and then go back and get it. I never felt that was appropriate...It's who you are," he responded to the Pope's encyclical by saying that "I don't get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinals or my Pope." Rick Santorum similarly said that Pope Francis should "leave science to scientists."<sup>24</sup> For voters who agree that religious faith should guide political action, these kinds of statements appear inconsistent.

In the long run, with polls showing that two-thirds of Americans said they were more likely to vote for political candidates who campaign on fighting climate change (including 48% of Republicans),<sup>25</sup> the shifting debate may lead Republicans to reexamine their party position on, not only climate change, but environmental issues in general. To that point, this past March Republican Senator and Presidential Candidate Lindsey Graham from South Carolina argued: "You know, when it comes to climate change being real, people of my party are all over the board... I think the Republican Party has to do some soul searching. Before we can be bipartisan, we've got to figure out where we are as a party... What is the environmental platform of the Republican Party? I don't know, either."<sup>26</sup>

### **Why Now? The Anthropocene.**

As we contemplate the possible implications of the Pope's encyclical letter, it is worth asking the question, why has this come out now? The modern environmental movement has been with us for more than 50 years. Why does this encyclical resonate so much today? One reason is that we are at a unique moment in our time on Earth as a species, one never faced before



and one requiring a new system of ethics, values, beliefs, worldviews and above all, spirituality.<sup>27</sup> Geophysicists have given this moment a name; it is called the Anthropocene.<sup>28</sup> The Pope's landmark encyclical provides a moral compass to help navigate this emerging era.

The Anthropocene is a proposed new geologic epoch, one which leaves the Holocene behind and acknowledges that humans are now a primary operating element in the Earth's ecosystems. Though the concept has not yet received full, formal recognition by geophysical societies, it points out that we can no longer describe the environment without including the role that humans play in how it operates. This era is argued to have started around the industrial revolution of the early 1800s, and has become more acute since "the Great Acceleration,"<sup>29</sup> around 1950 onwards. It is marked by the reality that, according to Nobel-prize winning, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen who first proposed the term: "Human activity has transformed between a third and a half of the land surface of the planet; Many of the world's major rivers have been dammed or diverted; Fertilizer plants produce more nitrogen than is fixed naturally by all terrestrial ecosystems; Humans use more than half of the world's readily accessible freshwater runoff."<sup>30</sup> Though the Pope singles out climate change in his encyclical letter, this is just one of nine "planetary boundaries" that scientists say represent "thresholds below which humanity can safely operate and beyond which the stability of planetary-scale systems cannot be relied upon."<sup>31</sup>

# Planetary Boundaries

after Johan Rockström, Stockholm Resilience Centre et al. 2009

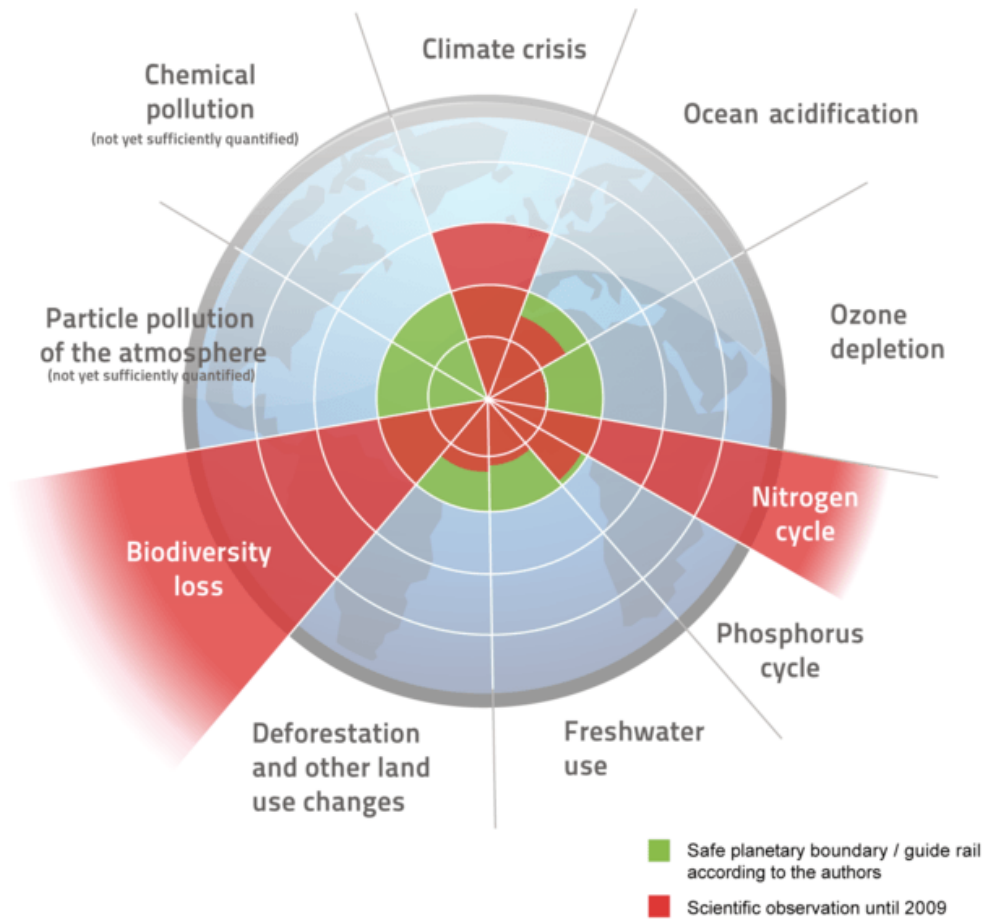


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In terms of science, acknowledging an unprecedented shift in our geophysical reality would be a significant and unprecedented moment in history. But, the social and cultural shift is even more profound.<sup>32</sup>

Recognition of the Anthropocene signals an urgency and complexity that the general idea of sustainable development lacks, compelling change deep within the structures of our collective understanding of the world around us. According to geographer and political philosopher Rory Rowan: “The Anthropocene is not a problem for which there can be a solution. Rather, it names an emergent set of geo-social conditions that already fundamentally structure the horizon of human existence. It is thus not a new factor that can be accommodated within existing

conceptual frameworks, including those within which policy is developed, but signals a profound shift in the human relation to the planet that questions the very foundations of these frameworks themselves.”<sup>33</sup>

Droughts, wildfires, food insecurity, water scarcity, and the social unrest that results are all emergent markers of the Anthropocene Era that point to a fundamental system failure created by our social structures. We now have control over the biosphere and therefore, the human systems which depend on it, in ways that are monumental. A response to the Anthropocene Era calls for a new set of values and beliefs about our relationship with the environment, with each other and for many, with God. And this is what the Pope’s encyclical letter is trying to articulate. He specifically calls out a desire to change “the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world” and in this way bring about a “paradigm shift” as Thomas Kuhn<sup>34</sup> called it, which occurs when scientists encounter anomalies that cannot be explained by the universally accepted paradigm. This precipitates a period of "intellectually violent revolution" in which "one conceptual world view is replaced by another.”

True to the form of a paradigm shift, his message will not go down easily. The accompanying tensions that such a shift will create are likely to be more pronounced than the currently polarized debate over climate change. The Anthropocene challenges our ways of understanding the environment and how they change on both regional and global scales. It leads to a transformative cultural shift that is akin to the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment was built on a cultural shift from perceiving nature as subsuming the human endeavor, to one in which humankind embarked on the “conquest of nature” and a metaphor of the planet as an enemy to be subdued. In similar ways, the Anthropocene is an acknowledgment that the scientific method which was essential to the Enlightenment is no longer fully adequate to understand the natural world and our impact upon it.

As the Pope points out in the encyclical letter: “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...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.” In responding to the “urgent challenge to protect our common home,” he asks us “to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development.” Indeed, this kind of global common cause is a challenge we have not yet faced as a species. It will require a level of cooperation that we are not prepared for, and that requires a global set of ethics and values we do not yet know.

### **The Lasting Legacy?**

Many have compared Pope Francis’ letter to the 1891 Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* or *Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*,<sup>35</sup> in which Pope Leo XIII addressed the condition of the working classes. In offering a way to understand the unprecedented confusion of clashing capitalist and communist notions of labor in the midst of the industrial revolution, *Rerum Novarum* has become a foundational document for Catholic social teaching.

Will *Laudato Si’* offer a similarly transformative way to understand the unprecedented confusion over global scale environmental and social changes that we are creating? The answer to that question is not solely a testament to the Encyclical Letter’s importance; it will be a testament to our ability to hear a message that is hard to hear, and harder still to act upon. As the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote in 1985: “We have become, by the power of a glorious evolutionary accident called intelligence, the stewards of life’s continuity on earth. We did not ask for this role, but we cannot abjure it. We may not be suited to it, but here we are.”<sup>36</sup>

Pope Francis is asking us to face this new reality with a religious frame of reference, calling for respect for the natural world around us and a humility to recognize our limitations in understanding how it works and what we are doing to it. He is asking it at a key moment in time when we are taking a new place in the natural world; what he is careful to call “creation” a term that connotes far more spiritual importance.

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