

# Pope Francis' Integral Ecology and Environmentalism *for* the Poor

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The anthropocentrism of Pope Francis' integral ecology in *Laudato Si'* serves two strategic functions. First, it allows the pope to foreground the concerns of humans vulnerable to the ravages of ecological devastation, especially in the Global South. More importantly, privileging human beings justifies the responsibility Pope Francis places on us to engage in more sustainable relationships with one another and the environment. The encyclical's investment in an ethics of care and the heterogeneity of its citational practice enhances its cosmopolitan appeal to audiences across religious affiliations and those with secular leanings.

## INTRODUCTION

On 24 May 2015, Pope Francis released his much-anticipated encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*.<sup>1</sup> In it, the pontiff articulated a religious and moral challenge to Christians and non-Christians alike on ecological responsibilities in the face of global warming and climate change. Pope Francis' charismatic allure and appeal even among non-Catholics meant that his encyclical reverberated beyond the Church. Since his election, his teachings on mercy and injustices against the poor and his departure from the opulence associated with the papal office have endeared him to many across the world. Testimony of his appeal was particularly evident in U.S. media outlets during his maiden visit to the United States in September 2015. During that visit, a few months after the release of the encyclical, the pope matched his words on prudence with action, jettisoning the traditional SUV for a compact Fiat. Throughout the visit, Catholics and non-Catholics enthusiastically welcomed a leader who uses his exalted position to rail against global capital on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. In his welcome remarks during that visit, then President Barack Obama praised the pope's intervention in the quest for a sustainable planet.<sup>2</sup> Those on the right of the political spectrum in the United States, however, did not share Obama's enthusiasm. Many conservatives who laud the Church's position on abortion and same-sex relationships reject the science of climate change that Pope Francis affirms.

Some critics have questioned whether the pope's encyclical is anti-modern or

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': Our Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, <http://www.audatosi.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and His Holiness Pope Francis at Arrival Ceremony," 23 September 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/23/remarks-president-obama-and-his-holiness-pope-francis-arrival-ceremony>.

supportive of modernity. R. R. Reno, for instance, has argued that the encyclical attacks the lineaments of modern, technological life. In his words, Pope Francis' encyclical "expresses strikingly anti-scientific, anti-technological, and anti-progressive sentiments."<sup>3</sup> M. Anthony Mills disagrees with Reno's position, instead asserting that "what the pontiff truly rejects in this encyclical is not modernity (much less science) but a particular modern philosophy about the relationship between modernity, science, and technology—what Pope Francis calls the 'technocratic paradigm.'"<sup>4</sup> Mills adds that Pope Francis' intention is not "to criticize science *per se*—or even technology *per se*—but the Baconian technocratic paradigm, which understands science and technology together as instruments for controlling and exploiting all of creation."<sup>5</sup> The pontiff's encyclical does take issue, in fact, with the rationalization of science and technology as a means of dominating nature, not the entirety of science.

In this article, I analyze the encyclical's take on environmental degradation and the possibilities for what the pope calls ecological conversion. While Pope Francis' idea of integral ecology reaches toward an interdependent ecological perspective, he positions humans at the top of this ecological relationship. Noting the anthropocentric disposition of the encyclical, I argue that privileging humans in the text serves two strategic functions. First, it allows the pope to foreground the concerns of humans vulnerable to the ravages of ecological devastation, especially in the Global South. More importantly, privileging human beings intensifies the charge Pope Francis gives us to engage in more sustainable relationships with one another and the Earth. In what follows, I explain Pope Francis' integral ecology and then analyze the three kinds of human in his ecological treatise. I conclude that the encyclical's investment in an ethics of care and the heterogeneity of its citational practice enhances its cosmopolitan appeal to audiences across religious affiliations and those with secular leanings.

### CONTOURS OF POPE FRANCIS' INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

The encyclical centers on the interdependence of all beings, not only locally or regionally, but also globally. On more than one occasion, the pope cautions humans to consider our actions in relation to their planetary implications, which often exceed the immediate environment or locality of occurrence. Pope Francis' ecological perspective also transcends time as he asks for consideration of not only the immediate consequences, but also the long-term costs, or rather what Rob Nixon has described elsewhere as the "slow violence" of certain environmental actions.<sup>6</sup> In appealing for

<sup>3</sup> See R. R. Reno, "The Return of Catholic Anti-Modernism," *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/06/the-return-of-catholic-anti-modernism>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Anthony Mills, "Is Pope Francis Anti-Modern? Pope Francis on the Environment II," *The New Atlantis* 47 (2015): 46.

<sup>5</sup> Mills, "Is Pope Francis Anti-Modern," p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

restraint in human dealings with our “common home,” Pope Francis exhorts readers to consider their descendants and the kind of environment they desire to bequeath to them. By making this emotional appeal that links the present generation to the unborn, the pontiff emphasizes the consequences of environmental devastation over time and across geographical boundaries, demonstrating the globality of spatial interconnections and interdependence.

Moreover, Pope Francis' integral ecology shows both biological and spiritual interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans. His vision of biological interconnection encompasses those interdependencies between human and nonhuman beings predicated on life processes. For instance, the pope writes that “our very bodies are made up of her [environmental] elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”<sup>7</sup> He foregrounds the idea of the environment as the source of human life. Our corporeal body is constituted by the Earth, the “her” alluded to in the passage. The necessity of clean air and water for human life cannot be overemphasized either. Taken together, then, this passage posits ecological interdependence of humans and nonhumans. Additionally, Pope Francis notes, “changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children.”<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis makes it clear that the long-term biological fate of the environment is tied to that of humans. If deforestation renders animals and plants homeless or without refuge, we see as well that such events also precipitate migration of poor humans and have implications for the future of biodiversity. Readers are asked in the above passage to visualize a shared vulnerability that transcends species and equally leaves imprints on humans, plants, and animals alike.

If biological interconnectedness hinges on shared material processes, the spiritual strand derives impetus from the pope's Christian and Catholic disposition. Remarkably, the pope cites his spiritual guide, whose name he adopted at the beginning of his papacy. Invoking St. Francis of Assisi, a lover of the nonhuman world and patron saint of ecology, the pope describes the Earth as sister.<sup>9</sup> The reference to the Earth as sister and mother enables the pope to establish a relationship that seems solely biological but is better described as a spiritual one. Although sister and mother evoke a biological, familial relationship, the reference centers on God as Father in this instance. This spiritual relationship is explained better later “as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, if biological interconnectedness

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the ecological implications of Saint Francis' work, see Keith Warner, “Franciscan Environmental Ethics: Imagining Creation as a Community of Care,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no.1 (2011): 143–60.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 65–66.

dictates that humans should care for the environment partly because humans are not altogether immune from the impacts of degradation, spiritual interconnectedness revalues nonhumans as co-creation to be respected. Seen either way, the environment or nonhuman life forms emerge as important components of the ecosystem imbued with value. Pope Francis' integral ecology calls for openness toward the other, defined broadly to include nonhuman and human lives across national boundaries. By signifying his integral ecology in both secular and spiritual terms, Pope Francis establishes his encyclical as a document grounded in religion, but also as a cosmopolitan treatise that can appeal to the non-religious.

In many ways, Pope Francis' integral ecology shares the attributes of other ecological perspectives including Timothy Morton's "ecological thought." For Morton, "Ecology shows us that all beings are connected. The ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness. . . . It's a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are concerned with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral."<sup>11</sup> Like Pope Francis, Morton emphasizes the interconnectedness of different beings by showing ways that humans are imbricated with other aspects of the environment. Morton also reaches for a global or transnational dimension with his idea of "progressive ecology that was big, not small; spacious, not place-ist; global, not local."<sup>12</sup> Both Pope Francis and Morton are aware of the primary lesson of globalization: the porosity of boundaries. Both thinkers also place intrinsic worth on the nonhuman implicated in this interrelationship and stress the need to confer respect on different life forms in the ecosystem.

These similarities notwithstanding, two divergences between their positions help to clarify Pope Francis' arguments and perspectives. The first is that whereas Morton's ideas in *The Ecological Thought* remain primarily philosophical and abstract, Pope Francis foregrounds the practical and social dimensions of his argument. If Morton's ecological thought, as its name implies, remains largely at the level of cognition, Francis moves very well into the realm of ecological praxis or activism as I demonstrate later in this essay. The second point of difference is that whereas Morton insists on equality in *The Ecological Thought*, Pope Francis places humans at the pinnacle of his integral ecology.

According to Morton, ecological thought "is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings."<sup>13</sup> Morton is not satisfied with only expanding the possibilities of what is permissible within the category of the person; he wants to shatter hierarchy to produce what he calls "truly equal beings."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the encyclical reserves a "unique" space for *Homo sapiens*: "This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

responsibility it entails.”<sup>15</sup> I address the question of responsibility broached in the passage later, but it should suffice to note that “unique worth” is the operative phrase here. While the pope regards as misleading the interpretation of the biblical passage that speaks of dominating the Earth and argues for the intrinsic worth of nonhumans throughout the encyclical, he, nevertheless, gives emphasis to humans because of what he considers their exceptional dignity and worth.

This unique status accorded the human in the pope’s schema often allows for nonhuman lives’ worth to be determined by their utilitarian value. On many occasions, Pope Francis rejects the idea of “absolute domination”: “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 justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”<sup>16</sup> Renouncing “absolute domination” does not reject domination writ large, but its extreme forms. Elsewhere in the document, he writes that “it would also be mistaken to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination.”<sup>17</sup> It is easy to notice that human domination is not the problem *per se*; rather, it is “arbitrary” forms that correlate with absolute kinds that the narrative critiques. To be sure, despite the pontiff’s best intentions for nonhuman lives, there remains what, in the words of Beatrice Marovich, amounts to a “flicker of a desire to convert and domesticate them.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the encyclical’s analyses of the consequences of environmental degradation do not always recognize the intrinsic value of nonhuman lives. According to the pope, “The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems.”<sup>19</sup> While the beginning of the passage suggests a concern for the loss of biodiversity when we consider the different creatures housed in forests, the remainder of the passage undercuts that nonanthropocentric position by putting emphasis on the implications of forest decimation to humans: loss of food, medicinal herbs, and other human needs that will be left unmet if deforestation remains unchecked. Twice in this passage, “resources,” a euphemism

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49. The pope rejects the claim that the global ecological crisis is traceable to the Biblical injunction authorizing human beings to dominate and subdue the Earth. For a full analysis of this claim, see Lynn White, Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 3–14; For a broader discussion of various religious conceptions of ecological relationship between humans and nonhumans, see Franca Bellarsi, “Ecospirit: Religion and the Environment,” *Ecozon@ 2*, no. 2 (2011): 1–16.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Beatrice Marovich, “Religious Biodiversity and our Common Home,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 285.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 24–25.

for instrumentalized life forms, is deployed to showcase the role of nonhumans as technologies for satisfying human desires. To be sure, whether it is in the rejection of absolute domination or in the direct instrumentalization of nonhuman bodies in the passage above, there are moments in *Laudato Si'* when nonhumans are not treated gently or with love as we should treat our "sister." In short, what emerges in these moments is a view of the ecosystem with the human at the top and other beings mobilized from the bottom of the ecological ladder to service their needs.

Thus, although Pope Francis may have done more than his predecessors to amplify the problem of environmental degradation with his modest lifestyle, his teachings on prudence and charity, the use of new media technologies, and the publication of his anticipated *Laudato Si'*, his endorsement of human exceptionalism locates his work within a tradition of papal ecowritings. As Christopher Hrynkow and Dennis Patrick O'Hara demonstrate, the privileged positioning of humans as unique beings, with exceptional dignity, is not particular to Pope Francis. Their review of the environmental writings of earlier popes, including John Paul II and Benedict XVI, shows that they remain "anthropocentric."<sup>20</sup> Francis himself aligns his work with those of his predecessors when he cites their postulations on judicious use of Earth's resources and their insistence that ecological decline is a consequence of "our irresponsible behavior."<sup>21</sup>

The encyclical's endorsement of some form of human domination raises certain questions: when does domination move from the realm of appropriate to arbitrary or absolute? Should domination even be permissible in human-nonhuman relationship? Is not it problematic that the pope endorses—albeit in a moderate form—the domination of the Earth/the environment considered as a sister? Is the pope conflating women and nature here? To what extent does his feminization of the environment allude to oppression that women face in society?<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, in positioning the Earth as sister, the pope humanizes the environment to establish relationality. This rhetorical move rescues the environment from passivity and objectification while raising the possibility of an ethics of care. The pope's action seems consistent with a kind of strategic anthropomorphism, which Jane Bennett argues can be useful for undermining anthropocentrism and bridging the gap that humans have placed between themselves and the nonhuman world.<sup>23</sup> Yet the feminization of the Earth raises the question of female exploitation across the world, including those sanctioned by the teachings of the Catholic Church,

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Hrynkow, and Dennis Patrick O'Hara, "The Vatican and Ecospirituality: Tensions, Promises, and Possibilities for Fostering an Emerging Green Catholic Spirituality," *Ecozon@ 2.2* (2011): 178.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ecofeminists have pointed to the relationship between the oppression of women and the environment by patriarchal structures. For further discussion of ecofeminism, see Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism," *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (2011): 26–53.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 99.

especially its doctrines on reproductive rights and policing of feminized bodies. Many examples of environmental degradation in the encyclical point to the objectification of the Earth in ways that harken to the objectification of women. The perception of the environment in instrumentalist, technocratic terms, as objects to be manipulated for satiating human desire, is consistent with the objectification of women, of understanding their value as being for the pleasure of the male gaze. Addressing the Earth as female also plays into the charge that has been labeled against some version of ecofeminism, which is that such comparisons obviate differences, essentialize women, and equate them with nature.

That said, there are strategic benefits to positioning humans at the top of the ecological ladder in the encyclical. George Handley speaks to one such benefit when he notes that “human exceptionalism is here [in the encyclical] marshaled for moral deliberation and action on behalf of the planet.”<sup>24</sup> As I show in the next section, the emphasis on human beings exposes their contributions to the ecological crisis even as it opens the space for future ecological responsibility and the more important process of ecological restoration. To unpack this claim, I highlight the three dimensions of *Homo sapiens* that appear in Pope Francis’ encyclical. In the spirit of the document, which uses numbers (1–246) to marshal the pope’s argument, I use Human 1, Human 2, and Human 3 to designate the different manifestations of human beings in *Laudato Si’*.

### THREE SHADES OF HUMAN

Human 1 appears in the document as the “being . . . capable of the worst,” who has contributed to the destruction of the ecology.<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis blames citizens and residents of developed countries whose consumption habits not only endanger their immediate environment, but also the ecosystems of those who live elsewhere, especially in developing countries. The encyclical indicts the negative consequences of Western modernity, especially the insatiable desire for more material goods and the delusions of human grandeur. Pope Francis takes aim at the technocratic inclination to conquer the Earth to satisfy the yearnings of a consumerist class while neglecting the implications of such actions for the nonhuman environment but also for humans elsewhere. Included in this category are those who hold the mistaken view that nonhuman life forms are useful to the extent that they satisfy human needs and wants.

Pope Francis does not spare deep ecologists who protect nonhuman lives but fail to accord “the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure” to those who are different due to race, class, ethnicity, nationality, among others.<sup>26</sup> The pope is

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<sup>24</sup> George B. Handley, “*Laudato Si’* and the Postsecularism of the Environmental Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 281.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

referring to those environmentalists who cherish exotic animals but have no qualms when humans are displaced. Put differently, these environmentalists lament the decimation of nonhuman lives while remaining silent to forms of human oppression. These people, despite their concern for nonhuman lives, also fall within the category of Human 1 as they cannot extend genuine compassion to fellow *Homo sapiens*. According to the pope's integral ecology, it is impossible to love nature "if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings."<sup>27</sup> The encyclical's critique can be brought to bear on conservation projects focusing on charismatic megafauna such as tigers in India as well as elephants and lions in different parts of Africa. In the process of protecting endangered species, many of such projects, often backed by Western donors, result in displacement of the human population. It is striking that the pope includes excessive consumers and environmentalists who care for only certain species within the same category, suggesting the futility of the latter's effort if their work is not recalibrated to accommodate a broader ecological spectrum.

Human 2 is the category where the global sensibility of Pope Francis' integral ecology is most ostensible. If environmental exploiters fall within the first category, we can place the human victims of exploitation here. As has become characteristic of the pontiff since his election, he focuses here on the vulnerable, the poor, who also deserve to live in dignity. In his words, "Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity."<sup>28</sup> While Pope Francis particularly adumbrates the vulnerabilities of people in developing countries of the Global South, his position on the poor applies to the economically and racially disadvantaged everywhere. It is remarkable that the pope uses water, an essential life need, to highlight the challenges of the poor. The choice of water is also significant because residents of Flint, Michigan, in the United States had their drinking water contaminated by lead even as the pope was preparing the encyclical. The government changed their water source from the Detroit River to the Flint River to reduce cost without considering safety issues. Even the complaints of the mostly African-American residents of the city were ignored by both the state government and the Environmental Protection Agency until the intervention of Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician who examined children from the area and Marc Edwards, an engineering professor who studied Flint's water supply.<sup>29</sup>

Although Flint, Michigan is in the developed world (as many commentators on the crisis are quick to note, as if similar occurrences are justifiable elsewhere), this tragic incident shows that the poor in developed countries are also caught in environmental disasters. Socioeconomic disadvantages combined with racial

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview and timeline of the Flint water crisis, see CNN, "Flint Water Crisis Fast Facts," 26 April 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/04/us/flint-water-crisis-fast-facts>.

disparity are responsible for the poisoning of the residents of Flint. Hillary Clinton, candidate of the Democratic Party in the 2016 United States presidential election, captured the racist undertone of the Flint incident when she asked if a similar poisoning could have occurred in a predominantly white city.<sup>30</sup> The point is that the vulnerable poor are distributed across developing and developed countries.

When Pope Francis is not making general statements on the plight of the poor in the Global South, he zooms in specifically on Africa, a continent racked by various ecological challenges including toxic waste dumping, dirty processes of resource extraction without recourse to best environmental practices, and poverty. Drawing attention to inequalities that characterize global relations, the pope writes: "Water poverty especially affects Africa where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production. Some countries have areas rich in water while others endure drastic scarcity."<sup>31</sup> The pope equally condemns the dumping of toxic waste and other nefarious practices of multinational corporations on the continent. Remarkably, the pontiff is quick to add that these corporations desist from similar practices in their home countries. Pope Francis is pointing to the view of Africa as a dump site justified by Lawrence Summers in his leaked memo when he served as World Bank chief economist. Summers suggested then that it is reasonable to dump toxic wastes on the continent because the Africans are poor and have a high mortality rate.<sup>32</sup> Although Pope Francis did not mention specific examples, perhaps in order not to be seen as shaming particular environmental polluters, examples of toxic dumping on the continent abound as do their implications for the well-being of the ecosystem. Because it sheds light on the experience of people who fall under Human 2, the victims of ecological crises, I here discuss one instance of this phenomenon in Africa.

The well-reported case of the dumping of toxic wastes in and around Abidjan in Ivory Coast serves as my example. Amnesty International's report of the disaster estimated that about one hundred thousand people were affected in varying degrees.<sup>33</sup> This assessment of the disaster only gives a partial picture, since toxic waste pollution falls within the ambit of what Nixon describes as "slow violence."<sup>34</sup> Given that the environmental devastation caused by such disasters is slow in physical manifestation and less spectacular than conventional forms of violence, their impacts are often underestimated. Yet the fact that their effects sometimes extend to

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of Clinton's perspective on the crisis, see Monica Alba, "Hillary Clinton: 'What Happened in Flint is Immoral,'" *NBC News*, 7 February 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/flint-water-crisis/hillary-clinton-what-happened-flint-immoral-n513296>.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> For an excerpt of the leaked memo and discussion, see Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International and Greenpeace Netherlands, *The Toxic Truth* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 2.

those unborn during the disaster, as evident in the Bhopal tragedy in India, make it important to consider the ecological impacts of such disasters more seriously. Marietta Harjono, the toxic campaigner for Greenpeace International in Amsterdam, summarizes the Ivory Coast incident well: “After a long journey, they decided to bring it to Cote d’Ivoire. It is truly an international story, because it all started with low quality gasoline brought from Mexico and the U.S., traveled through Europe, then to the Mediterranean where it was processed. But it ended up at the doorsteps of the people of Abidjan who had nothing to do with it.”<sup>35</sup>

The multinational corporation, Trafigura, had the option of treating the waste in the Netherlands but considered the cost prohibitive. The alternative destination was Cote d’Ivoire, a country with disposable people, with only “bare life” to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s term.<sup>36</sup> The Africans who become victims of the toxic material are denied the political and legal rights that made it impossible for the ship to berth in Europe or America. What is pertinent is the expendability of black lives, which is obvious even in the settlement proceedings. None of the parties accepted responsibility for the disaster. Trafigura only agreed to pay compensation in order to close the case. The economic logic guiding Summers’s decision at the World Bank also guided the decision makers at Trafigura.

Economic logic in this case aligns with environmental racism, which according to Bunyan Bryant, manifests in “disproportionate exposure of toxic and hazardous waste on communities based upon certain prescribed biological characteristics.”<sup>37</sup> What joins Flint, Michigan in the United States to the Ivory Coast is the allocation of toxic risk based on racial classification. Whether it is in Flint or on the coast of West Africa, toxic poisoning is rendered possible by the disposability of those bodies—black bodies—that can be killed with little or no consequences. The people of these communities are exempted from the rights to a clean environment, a right that is implied when Hillary Clinton asked if the water poisoning could have happened in a white community; the same right made it impossible for Trafigura to dump the chemical waste in Europe.

W. David Montgomery captures the significance of the encyclical’s emphasis on the global poor when he writes that “stressing these obligations [to the poor], the encyclical fills a gap in discussions of climate policy, which are replete with what should be done but tend to lack a convincing moral framework.”<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis’ work suggests that an account of globalization is incomplete without attending to the ecological consequence of their workings outside the main circuit of global capital. As the Ivory Coast incident makes clear, the human costs of these disasters

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<sup>35</sup> Kim Lewis, “Toxic Dumping in Ivory Coast Called Environmental Disaster,” *Voice of America*, 26 September 2012, <https://www.voanews.com/a/toxic-waste-disaster-illegal-dumping/1515095.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Bunyan Bryant, “Introduction,” *Environmental Justice: Issues, Politics, and Solutions* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> W. David Montgomery, “The Flawed Economics of *Laudato Si’*,” *The Atlantis* 47 (2015): 31.

are inseparable from their consequences on nonhuman lives. If we can easily count the humans endangered by the toxic dumping incident, what about the plants and animals affected by the toxin? Who is taking stock of land, water, and air polluted by the chemical toxins? The interconnectedness at the heart of Pope Francis' integral ecology opens the space for considering nonhuman lives even when the overt focus seems to be concentrated on human beings.

To recapitulate, the humans brought into focus here are victims of the global ecological crises, especially those in the developing world who rely primarily on the environment for sustenance. It also includes those vulnerable members of developed societies who are disadvantaged because of their race and class. Human 2 encompasses the least of our brothers and sisters deserving of compassion, consideration, and care. In Human 3, discussed next, the pope replaces the despondency which characterizes Human 2 with optimism and a call for a renewed human who strives for a better future.

If Human 1 is comprised of environmental polluters, and Human 2 includes victims of the environmental tragedies committed by members of the former category, Human 3 is a special category, an aspirational stage characterized by a process of becoming. One can argue that it is here that the encyclical's ethical dimension appears most forcefully. As Pope Francis puts it, "Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change."<sup>39</sup> The pope challenges humans to stop exploiting nature and to embrace virtues that are at the heart of what it means to be human: "integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human."<sup>40</sup> From this passage, the reader can see that previous human categories are not ends in themselves but transitional phases of existence. For Francis, openness to the other, broadly defined throughout the encyclical to include human and nonhuman lives, is an essential character of the ideal human subjectivity. Rather than partake in environmental destruction, this new human will take seriously the injunction to till and nourish the Earth. According to the pontiff,

"Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the Earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the Earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.<sup>41</sup>

Tilling here is differentiated from the indiscriminate exploitation of the environment.

The encyclical demands both individual and collective responsibility from constituents of Human 3. The pope is optimistic that individuals "are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start,

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<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom.”<sup>42</sup> While he concedes the worst in human beings in Human 1, the pontiff, in Human 3, celebrates their redemptive potential.

Human 3 must also show “[d]isinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment.”<sup>43</sup> Selflessness and concern for the interest of others—fellow human beings across space and time, and the natural environment—are hallmarks of the new human personality that the encyclical endorses. Pope Francis is gesturing at what Ursula Heise describes as “eco-cosmopolitanism.”<sup>44</sup> If cosmopolitanism (without the *eco*) stresses responsibilities toward fellow humans, especially strangers, Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism “then, is an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds.”<sup>45</sup> Both Heise and Pope Francis astutely contend that globalization has rendered obsolete place-based thinking that does not consider interconnections across borders. The new human, Human 3, or eco-cosmopolitan is one who transcends parochial, local considerations to take responsibility for the impacts of their actions on the biosphere. This individual rejects self-interest and demonstrates in words and deeds concern for the survival of the planet.

What I am calling Human 3 shares certain affinities with posthuman subjectivity. If we go with the perspective of Rosi Braidotti, the posthuman is a “relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable.”<sup>46</sup> Braidotti goes on to clarify that the posthuman subject is acculturated to embrace an “enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.”<sup>47</sup> Like Human 3 of Pope Francis’ encyclical, the posthuman subject is against the exploitation that we see with Human 1. In fact, Braidotti and other proponents of the posthuman turn eschew the idea of the human precisely because of the transgressions that are committed in that name, precisely the exploitation of the biosphere that constitutes the signature of Human 1. To overcome the narcissistic human tendencies permitting the subjugation of other beings in the environment and the residual strain of anthropocentrism remaining in Pope Francis’ conceptualization, the posthumanists advocate for the deconstruction of

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–53.

<sup>44</sup> Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–50.

“species supremacy, but it [posthumanism] also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, *anthropos* and *bios*, as categorically distinct from the life of animals and nonhumans, or *zoe*.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite the shared attributes, it is in on this last point that Pope Francis and the posthumanists part ways. While posthumanists want to dismiss human nature, the pope insists on the uniqueness of the human person. As I have indicated earlier, the unique worth allows the pope to place the responsibility of ecological restoration at the doorstep of the inhabitants of Human 3. Where the posthumanists celebrate transcending “human nature” and the merger of human and technology, or the process of becoming machine, Pope Francis remains optimistic about humanity’s capacity for good while advising for caution on the use of technology, to forestall their negative impact on the ecosystem.

Although it foregrounds individual responsibility, the encyclical equally endorses collectivities formed in the interests of the planet. Nixon’s claim that “planetary problems — and transnational, national and regional ones — cannot simply be resolved by the aggregated actions of responsible individuals” is pivotal for understanding the nod to the collective and the transnational in the encyclical.<sup>49</sup> Collective action should be directed, in the words of the pontiff, “to ensure that solutions are proposed from a global perspective, and not simply to defend the interests of a few countries. Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan.”<sup>50</sup> The pope enters the arena of politics with his demand for international forms of mobilizations that includes states, political organizations, ecological movements, and other communities. These collectivities are charged, as in the words of Donna Haraway, “to join forces to reconstitute refugees, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition.”<sup>51</sup> Maximizing the opportunity for political intervention in the encyclical, Pope Francis remarks that a “true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the Global North and South, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.”<sup>52</sup> Countries in the Global North must also curb their overconsumption, which puts undue strain on environments in the Global South, and commit to assisting struggling nations overcome their economic challenges.

While the pope’s emphasis on responsibility is laudable, he does not extend the same task to the elites of developing countries who often collude with Western multinationals to plunder their economies and environment. While countries of the Global North and the corporations they house continue to destroy environments in

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 39.

<sup>50</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 121–22.

<sup>51</sup> Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 160.

<sup>52</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 36–37.

Africa and elsewhere, state officials and elites in these societies also bear culpability. In the Niger Delta of Nigeria, for instance, where oil pollution has significantly scarred the environment, the activities of Shell and other oil companies went unchecked due to the connivance of successive governments whose self-interests trumped concern for the environment and national interests.<sup>53</sup> Byron Caminero-Santangelo aptly captures the unholy alliance when he writes that given the heavy dependence of both the Nigerian government and oil companies on earnings from oil extraction in the Delta, “it is little surprise that the relationship between the national government and the multinational oil corporations remain as cozy as ever.”<sup>54</sup> The elite class in Nigeria and other countries in the Southern Hemisphere need to give up their self-interests if their societies are to overcome the current environmental crisis.

#### CONCLUSION: THE ENCYCLICAL AND THE SEARCH FOR BIODIVERSITY

In this essay, I have sketched the contours of Pope Francis’ integral ecology as articulated in *Laudato Si’*. I showed how the pope’s ecological thinking underscores a global perspective transcending local, regional, and national boundaries even as he stresses the interdependence of human and nonhuman beings. Although the various life forms are brought together in an interdependent relationship, Pope Francis’ integral ecology reserves a unique status for humans who remain at the apex of this ecological relationship. While this ecological arrangement justifies to some extent the exploitation of nonhuman lives, privileging humans also allows the pope to appropriately assign the responsibility of tackling the ecological crisis. To bring about the ideal planetary future, Pope Francis paints the figure of the ideal human subjectivity described as Human 3 in this essay. This person cares for the environment and is mindful of his or her obligations to fellow human beings. These preferred humans are also cognizant of the impacts of their practices on people living in other climes and works assiduously to minimize footprints on the ecosystem.

In articulating his vision of the ideal human subjectivity, the pope couches his arguments and appeals not only in religious terms. In fact, one achievement of the encyclical, as I indicated earlier, is its potential to attract interest across religious boundaries and among non-religious people. Immediately after his election, the pope paved the way for the encyclical with his words and actions in support of the environment and the global poor. Ascending to the papacy in a period of stark inequality and in the wake of the Occupy movement, the pope’s deliberate rejection of the trappings of his office and admonition of the rich endeared him to many,

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<sup>53</sup> For a history of Shell’s activities in the Delta, see Ike Okonta and Orono Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. 137.

including non-Christians. As such it made sense that his celebrity status drew global attention to *Laudato Si'* when it appeared. Moreover, the document's ethical demands are articulated to achieve universal appeal. In exemplifying ecological interconnectedness in both biological and spiritual terms, the encyclical enables the secularist to identify a science-based understanding of planetary degradation. The demonstrable use of facts and statistics to ground the future consequences of environmental degradation as well as the appeals to preserve our common home for future generations, to cut waste, and to be concerned about the plight of the poor, especially in the Global South, are other elements of the encyclical that will appeal to the secular mind. Additionally, the overt nod to international alliances for combating poverty and ecological decline implicates the pope in secular transnational politics.

Yet, Pope Francis is aware of Anna L. Peterson's point that "religion remains the primary way that most people conceptualize the 'big questions' of ethics and metaphysics."<sup>55</sup> Put in different terms, the pope recognizes the pervasiveness of religion as an organizing principle for many across the world and its potential for addressing ecological challenges. In his words, "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>56</sup> The pope justifies the heterogeneity of sources in his encyclical, a point to which we can add that such multiplicity serves another strategic function. In addition to showcasing the array of religious resources useful for ecological purposes, the various sources have the potential to speak to many audiences. The non-religious reader can be drawn to the ethics of care and the morality of social equality framed in secular terms, while the faith practitioner can be arrested by the relational positioning of the nonhuman world as co-creation and sacred.

Following the work of Ivone Gebara, who has articulated the value of "religious biodiversity," I want to suggest religion in *Laudato Si'* should not be conceived strictly in the Catholic or Christian sense.<sup>57</sup> Attentive readers of the encyclical will notice the array of religious sources that the pope marshals, that is, what Matthew Chrulew aptly calls the "surprising pluralism of its citation practices."<sup>58</sup> The ecumenical document includes references to the words of African and Latin American bishops, teachings of liberation theology, the writings of the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and even the doctrines of indigenous communities. Why would a Catholic pope want to endorse indigenous practices, which often contradict the

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<sup>55</sup> Anna L. Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>57</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), p. 207.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Chrulew, "Francis' Planetary Practice," *Environmental Humanities* 8.2 (2016): 246.

principles of his faith? The interfaith citational practice of the encyclical lends support to the notion of religious biodiversity. For Gebara, this form of biodiversity “will open us up to an understanding not only of the Christian experience but of others” that allow the thriving of human and nonhuman lives.<sup>59</sup> Religious biodiversity does not imply antagonism between religions but is characterized by what Rosemary Radford Ruether describes as “critical discerning within each religion,” premised on appropriating what is of utmost value.<sup>60</sup>

Outside Christianity, the practices of Eastern religions, including Buddhism, and of indigenous people, some of which the pope cites, are also generative of insights that can be beneficial for the transformations necessary to bring about a sustainable planetary future. The relational positioning of humans to other beings in the environment for instance, is a fine attribute of Buddhism.<sup>61</sup> Writing of indigenous cosmologies, Pope Francis avers that “For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best.”<sup>62</sup> *Sacred* is a key term in the passage as it complicates the conception of land as a mere resource for human use. The land is crucial for generational continuity as it connects the current generation to their ancestral past and serves as a link between the present and future.

As an Argentine, Pope Francis was raised amid similar indigenous practices in the Americas. Marisol de la Cadena’s work among the Andes, for instance, has shown the preponderance of “Earth beings,” nonhuman lives who merit recognition and respect in that culture.<sup>63</sup> In Africa, the continent that the pope cites again and again in his encyclical, certain indigenous practices equally commit to placing nonhumans in a relational disposition with *Homo sapiens*. Wangari Maathai, the late Kenyan Nobel Laureate, amplifies the reverence for the environment among the Gikuyus in her memoir, *Unbowed*. According to her,

... reverence the communities had for the fig tree helped to preserve the stream and the tadpoles that so captivated me. The trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides. In such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity.<sup>64</sup>

Humans in this environment are socialized to respect the fig tree and other nonhuman

<sup>59</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, p. 211.

<sup>60</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World: A Christian View,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 25 (2005): 30.

<sup>61</sup> For an elaborate discussion of relational positioning in Buddhism and implications for environmental ethics, see Peterson, *Being Human*, pp. 84–90.

<sup>62</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics,’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334–70.

<sup>64</sup> Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 46.

components of their ecology. In the process, the stream, soil, and tadpoles are preserved. In no way does the foregoing romanticize indigenous people or adherents of Buddhism as pure protectors of the environment. Like the rest of us, these are complex beings who reflect this complexity in their relationships to the environment. Nevertheless, the ecological values they espouse can finely complement the pope's exhortation on treating nonhuman beings and the larger environment with care.

The critical discernment at the heart of religious biodiversity is equally applicable to the contradictory impulse of the Christian scriptures on other-than-human lives. On one hand, as I have shown above, nonhuman lives are put at the mercy of humans who can "dominate" them. On the other hand, the Bible generates another possibility, of conceiving nonhuman lives as God's creation deserving of utmost respect, or as John Berkman puts it in the case of animals, that they "exist neither for their own sake nor for the sake of human beings but for the glory of God."<sup>65</sup> Critical discernment means that Christians opt for the latter ethics of care instead of the former form of predatory relationship. The ethics of care is at the heart of *Laudato Si'* and it should appeal to all, whether we are Christians or not and regardless of our religious inclination.

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<sup>65</sup> John Berkman, "The Consumption of Animals and the Catholic Tradition," in *Food for Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*, ed. Steve F. Sapontzis (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004), p. 205.

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