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# ***Laudato Si'* and the Environmental Imperative: a Compelling Theology for our Times?**

***Stephen N. Williams***

## RÉSUMÉ

L'encyclique papale *Laudato Si'* traite de questions environnementales en proposant une synthèse de la foi et de la raison. Prenant en compte la variété des réactions à cette encyclique, l'auteur vise à adopter une approche indépendante de celle-ci. Après un exposé de sa synthèse, il avance qu'elle n'est pas pleinement convaincante parce qu'elle ne prend pas suffisamment en compte les objections rationnelles qui sont opposées à la vision chrétienne de la création

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## SUMMARY

The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'* approaches environmental questions by offering a synthesis of faith and reason. Acknowledging the range of responses which *Laudato Si'* has received, this article tries to adopt an independent approach to the encyclical. After describing the synthesis, it argues that it is not entirely persuasive because the encyclical does not show enough awareness of rational objections that are brought against the Christian understanding of

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die päpstliche Enzyklika *Laudato Si'* befasst sich mit Umweltfragen und bietet dabei eine Synthese von Glaube und Vernunft. Der vorliegende Artikel nimmt das weite Spektrum von Antworten wahr, welche *Laudato Si'* hervorgerufen hat, doch er versucht, einen unabhängigen Ansatz im Blick auf die Enzyklika zu vertreten. Nach einer Beschreibung der obigen Synthese argumentiert er, dass diese nicht gänzlich überzeugt, weil die Enzyklika die rationalen Er widerungen nicht ausreichend wahrnimmt, die dem christlichen Verständnis von Schöpfung und

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et de l'eschatologie. Ce défaut affaiblit l'argumentation de l'encyclique. L'auteur met aussi en question l'usage insistant, dans l'encyclique, de la personnification pour décrire le monde, et sa tendance panenthéiste. On peut estimer et vouloir prendre soin du monde naturel sans décrire la relation de Dieu au monde dans les termes de *Laudato Si'*. Ces critiques viennent cependant dans un contexte de chaude appréciation du contenu de l'encyclique et d'une exhortation à prendre au sérieux l'exemple personnel de François d'Assise.

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creation and of eschatology. This weakens the argument of the encyclical on its own terms. The article also raises questions about both *Laudato Si'*'s emphasis on personified language to describe the world and its panentheism. We can value and care for the natural world without describing the relationship of God to the world in the terms of *Laudato Si'*. However, these criticisms are placed in a context of warm appreciation for the encyclical and an exhortation for us to take the personal example of Francis of Assisi seriously.

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Eschatologie entgegengesetzt werden. Dadurch entkräftet die Enzyklika ihre eigene Argumentation. Der Artikel wirft des weiteren Fragen auf sowohl zum Schwerpunkt, den *Laudato Si'* auf eine personifizierte Sprache legt, mit der sie die Welt beschreibt, als auch zu ihrem Panentheismus. Wir können die natürliche Welt wertschätzen und Sorge für sie tragen, ohne dass wir die Beziehung Gottes zu dieser Welt mit den Worten von *Laudato Si'* beschreiben müssen. Gleichwohl ist diese Kritik eingebettet in eine wohlwollende Wertschätzung der Enzyklika und die gleichzeitige Ermahnung an uns, das persönliche Vorbild von Franz von Assisi ernst zu nehmen.

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## 1. Introduction

Whatever its long-term impact will be, there is no doubt that the short-term impact of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, has been great.<sup>1</sup> In an essay in a volume dedicated to it and published by a major press, we read several major claims about it: that it 'has triggered a world-wide debate'; that '[i]t is unprecedented in the history of Catholic social teaching for renowned scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Science* to publish favourable editorials before and after the publication of an encyclical'; and that 'with *Laudato Si'* the church is now challenging the world'.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to the volume in which this essay appeared, the editor observes that this encyclical 'was greeted with more attention and enthusiasm than any previous papal letter'.<sup>3</sup> '[I]t can be seen', remarks another contributor, 'as the twenty-first century's *Rerum Novarum*'.<sup>4</sup> In addressing our present environmental crisis, *LS* indisputably does service in relation to an unquestionably urgent issue and our first response should be to salute it gratefully on that score.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will make some critical observations but the context in which I do so is one of warm appreciation. I will be focussing on the idea of synthesis.

Lay readers of *LS* may insist that it does not take a peculiarly theological nose to pick up the scent given off by the word 'synthesis' in the document, but they may also say that it takes a peculiarly theological interest to be arrested by the scent. Be that as it may, once spotted, the trail is not hard to follow:

The Catholic Church is open to dialogue with philosophical thought; this has enabled her to produce various syntheses between faith and reason. The development of the Church's social teaching represents such a synthesis with regard to social issues... (63).

In *LS*, the principle of synthesis is advertised, exhibited and applied beyond formal philosophy and theology to social teaching, specifically in relation to the environment. 'Synthesis', though familiar in a Thomist context, is not a specifically Thomist preserve. Bonaventure also synthesised faith and reason.<sup>6</sup> He was the great architect of early Franciscan theology, on which tradition the Pope (himself a Jesuit) draws in his encyclical.

I shall not go into the question of how Bonaventure's peculiar synthesis is brought to bear on *LS* or even whether the synthesis in *LS* should be seen as a Bonaventuran as opposed to a

Thomist synthesis.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, I do not pursue the kind of academic enquiry which, from its inception, *LS* invites for those so inclined. For example, commentators have long discussed the passive imperative form 'Laudato' in Francis' Cantic of the Sun and the best translation and interpretation of the preposition 'per' (usually 'through') in the line from the Cantic quoted in the first paragraph of *LS*.<sup>8</sup> My interest lies in what *LS* says, not in the theological moves which lie behind it.

In what follows, I aim to do three things. The first is to describe how *LS* sets out its synthesis or syntheses. The second is to ask whether it does so persuasively. The third is to enquire into the vision of a grand unity (not identity) between God and world which constitutes the theological ontology within which the synthesis is embedded. This ontological unity is obviously not a form of synthesis, but the document as a whole studiously conjures up a picture of God, mind and world in unified and not in disjunctive terms so that the epistemology and the ontology presented in *LS* exude a single, internally harmonious, spirit.

## 2. How the synthesis works

We turn first to the synthesis which is explicitly set forth in *LS*.<sup>9</sup> In the introduction to his encyclical, Pope Francis says that he 'would like to enter into dialogue with all people about *our* common home' (3), that he desires a 'new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet' (14). Chapter 5 highlights the centrality of dialogical ambition in *LS*. This dialogical ambition is grounded in synthesis. Of course, talk of dialogue as such has no necessary connection with synthesis; global crises and social threats naturally stimulate or invite dialogue just by virtue of their urgency, let alone the 'unprecedented' (17) nature of the situation in question. Speaking generally, *ad hoc* practical policy agreement is all that we might usually expect from assorted participants in crisis dialogues. However, *LS* operates along more ambitious lines. What grounds its particular invitation to dialogue is a foundational conviction about synthesis. It is the conviction that faith and reason are fundamentally harmonious.<sup>10</sup>

The general synthesis of faith and reason which pervades the document incorporates the specific synthesis of scientific data with the deliverances of faith. According to *LS*, reason, without reference to faith, should interpret the data of empirical science in a framework that is wider than that of

empirical science itself. Empirical science is thus brought into a synthetic relationship with faith by being incorporated into a wider rational framework. Introducing the discussion of 'religions in dialogue with science', *LS* observes that '[i]f we reason within the confines of' empirical science, 'little room would be left for ... reason's ability to grasp the ultimate meaning and purpose of things' (199).<sup>11</sup> Faith and science are compatible because reason, which is compatible with faith, has incorporated the findings of science. In sum, the principle of a broad overarching synthesis between faith and reason informs the thinking of *LS*, framing any other particular syntheses. Whether faith and the physical sciences or faith and the social sciences is in view, *LS* approaches its readership armed with a sturdy theological conviction about the way in which faith and reason mesh.

The endnote that is attached to the paragraph to which I make reference above (199) quotes from the earlier papal encyclical Letter, *Lumen Fidei*, to affirm that 'faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation'.<sup>12</sup> Broadly and schematically speaking, we might say that, all in all, reason goes beyond empirical science and faith goes beyond reason. Faith is entirely hospitable to human reason in *LS* because *LS* is informed by a deep conviction about the essentially religious nature of human beings. Reason trades out of a religious human centre, whether or not reason knows it. Hence, the Church can confidently address the world.

Although *LS* appeals deliberately to those principles of faith which lie outside the immediate range of purely rational perception, the early use of the phrase 'theological and philosophical reflection' (17) signals something that we notice throughout the document: theological and philosophical reflection often merge so that one and the same conviction is described as the product of a philosophical and/or of a theological vision.<sup>13</sup> The concentrated attention to synthesis in *LS* is immediately preceded by an appeal for all readers to view engagement with religion as necessary in order to attain wisdom; religion and science ought to achieve fruitful complementarity in their approaches to the world (62-63). In the same way that the Church is more than open to science and to philosophy, gladly incorporating them into theological wisdom, so science and philosophy also ought to be more than open to theology, the crowning human knowledge. A satisfactory and strictly

accurate answer to the question: 'What belongs to reason and what belongs to faith according to the synthesis proffered in *LS*?' is probably hard to give without probing the thought of Bonaventure in particular. But such probing would be an irrelevant distraction from what *LS* is trying to get across to its readership. Suffice it for us to note that both the distinction and the unity between reason and faith or between philosophy and theology are observed throughout *LS*.<sup>14</sup>

Am I making a mountain out of a mole-hill, unduly elevating what is marginal in *LS* itself just because the word 'synthesis' rings philosophical and theological bells for philosophers and theologians? No: the question of the relationship between faith and reason is in the foreground and not in the background of *LS*'s engagement with environmental issues. This is scarcely surprising given that, in the document, the passion of environmental concern in particular and the passion of faith in general coalesce into a single passion to persuade all readers. When a responsible religious body such as the Catholic Church includes in its address a largely irreligious readership and the adherents of other religious traditions, the question of the relationship of faith and reason will lurk unmistakably in the background if it is not placed explicitly in the foreground. It is the ambition of *LS* to promote a unified 'philosophical and theological vision of the human being and of creation' (130). This ambition perhaps culminates in the statement: 'We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge ... in the service of a more integral and integrating vision' (141).<sup>15</sup> Such a humanism, we read, is not easy to attain when we exclude God from our lives (224).

How does *LS* proceed to unpack a humanism held fast within its framework of synthesis? 'The ethical principles capable of being apprehended by reason can always reappear in different guise and find expression in a variety of languages, including religious language' (199). In *LS* love, justice, compassion, responsibility, pain on account of environmental degradation and care for our common home are all seen as both profoundly rational and profoundly religious principles and passions. If a sound rational basis is offered for these things, religious people should affirm this basis. Correspondingly, any purportedly rational basis which is self-sufficiently closed to religious input is not soundly rational.

Supposing the reader makes a distinction:

either we hold that non-religious reasons are adequate but that supplementary religious considerations remain possible or we hold that non-religious reasons are valid but insufficient and so supplementary religious considerations are required for proper environmental engagement. Which of these two does *LS* set out to do – to provide supplementary but not necessary religious reasons for environmental concern or to remedy rational insufficiency religiously? If we are determined to elicit an answer to a question couched in these terms, we must answer that it envisages the latter. While *LS* does not say in so many words that a coherent non-religious humanism is *absolutely* unattainable, it is judged difficult to attain. It is, at best, precarious and dubious.

*LS* presents its synthesis in the light of a compelling vision rather than as an intellectually cold offering. A specifically Trinitarian outlook ought to undergird our common environmental concern: 'Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity' (240). We are pointed in a Trinitarian direction by the example of St. Francis of Assisi. If Bonaventure 'teaches us that *each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*', thus 'point[ing] out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a Trinitarian key' (239), it is Francis' celebration of creation that attracts us to a vision of Father, Son and Spirit as source, sustainer and goal of creation. The synthesis of faith and reason is embedded in the conviction and perception of a grand ontological unity – the conviction deriving from and the perception afforded to the vision of faith. On its surface, *LS* does not try to indicate categorically whether the attainment of this vision is viewed as the climax of rationality or as something which exhibits the limits of reason. Our response to the question of whether the synthesis of faith and reason is persuasive should not be perched on a decision about how to read it on that point. But is it persuasive?

### 3. A persuasive synthesis?

We could critique *LS* from the point of view of the principle of faith-reason synthesis, but that exercise would not bear on the content of *LS* as such. I therefore waive general questions of theological and philosophical epistemology and consider the success of the synthesis in *LS* on its own terms. It is vastly ambitious in scope. Chapter 4 is on 'Inte-

gral Ecology' and we learn in it that *LS* is rooted in the conviction that the question of the environment is extremely comprehensive and rightly approached only within an all-encompassing perspective. 'When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it' (139). The human and natural environments hang together, stand together and 'deteriorate together' (48).<sup>16</sup> We can neither understand nor properly address the issue before us as long as we discard the notion of indisputable truths in general (6) or the reality of 'the natural and moral structure' of humans in particular (116).<sup>17</sup> This is a God-given structure. The upshot is that if we approach the several human, social and natural environmental issues 'piecemeal...I [the Pope] do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results' (160). The aim to protect humankind from self-destruction in every respect accompanies *LS*'s summons to humankind to care for nature (79).

*LS* is not content merely to gesture in a general way in the direction of questions which are broader than those which pertain immediately to the natural environment. It gets specific. Support is offered early for the position adopted by Pope Benedict XVI that environmental issues should not be tackled without addressing, for example, questions of sexuality and the family (6). The family is 'the basic cell of society' (157), 'the heart of the culture of life', as Pope John Paul II put it (213).<sup>18</sup> Statements of the familiar Catholic positions on birth control (50), embryo experimentation (136) and abortion (120) are not just incidental to the argument of *LS*.<sup>19</sup> The stark assertion that 'the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion' (120) is flanked, on the one hand, by the claim that 'we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental relationships' (119) and, on the other, by the call to 'develop a new synthesis' (121), understood as an integration of Catholic and contemporary social thought.<sup>20</sup> For *LS* our ethics of abortion is a test of our care for the most vulnerable and so an important ingredient in a unified concern for the natural and human environments.

In its introduction, *LS* announces that it will 'consider some principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent' (15) and I have just given examples of this. There are two strengths in the strategy which *LS* adopts

here. Firstly, it realistically refuses to compartmentalise human life in its recognition that the world of moral activity constitutes an undivided whole. Secondly, it refuses to adopt this position only tacitly, concealing some rays of its Christian light under a bushel. Of course, given the universal readership at which *LS* aims (and picking up the word ‘coherent’ above) judgements on its inner coherence will be inseparable from judgements on its substance. *LS* italicises its declaration that ‘access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right ... a condition for the exercise of other human rights’ (30). Yet some will predictably respond that as long as *LS* implies the denial of abortion rights, the marital rights of same-sex couples and transgender rights, the italics advertise the incoherence of its position on basic and universal human rights.<sup>21</sup> From this point of view, *LS* aspires to uphold human rights across the board in the service of a coherent environmental outlook while denying them in particular cases. Other readers will hold that environmental questions are logically independent of wider social questions which are gratuitously (as they see it) imported by *LS*, whether or not *LS* is correct on the substance of its wider social teaching. Others again will agree that all these issues are inter-dependent in principle, but that this does not entail subscribing to the particular positions on abortion and family adopted in the document. There is no need to rehearse all the options here nor shall I attempt to evaluate the holistic outlook in *LS*, but let it be said that the synthesis worked out in *LS* faithfully serves its Christian humanism, uncompromisingly expressing the conviction ‘that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself’ (66).

Whatever we make of its holism, if we narrow our view to concentrate on the physical world, we are bound to ask whether the synthesis presented in *LS* involves theological convictions which stand in unacknowledged tension with reason. Two matters may be mentioned. Firstly, what should we make of the long-standing objection that there are features of the natural order, forms of cruelty, waste or purposelessness, which appear to be inconsistent with the ascription of power, goodness and beauty to the divine Creator of the universe? This objection calls into question the declaration that the natural world reveals God (12).<sup>22</sup> It may or may not go so far as to allege the downright inconsistency of belief in God with our

scientific understanding of the natural world, but, whether it does or not, the objection may be far stronger than a matter of merely drawing quizzical attention to a *prima facie* surface tension between religious belief and cosmic reality.

The second objection is that contemporary science posits the ultimate destiny of the cosmos as one of either freezing or frying. These are the only scientific and thus rational alternatives. *Tertium non datur*.<sup>23</sup> *LS*, however, proclaims a glorious eschatological transfiguration of the cosmos (243). It aspires to offer Christian resources for environmental commitment in our dire global situation alongside the rational ones which we should possess in common with non-religious people or adherents of non-Christian religious traditions. But, so the objection goes, whatever its religious or motivating power here and there, however sound some of its appeals to reason and however welcome its principled invocation of the empirical facts, *LS* fails as an overall synthesis because it simply ignores what is contrary to reason with respect to the destiny of the cosmos. Taken together, the two objections point to our rational apprehension of, respectively, the nature and destiny of the world as stumbling-blocks to the synthesis advanced in *LS*. Are these objections sound?

À propos the first objection, we should note that *LS* does not entirely leave out of sight the problem of so-called ‘natural evil’. ‘Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth ...’ (80). It is not clear how extensive the scope of this statement is, i.e., whether it purports to cover all or just a great number of cases of natural evil. Whatever its scope, the critic’s question remains why a God to whom power and goodness are ascribed – and much is made of these ascriptions in *LS* – should create such a world.<sup>24</sup> It is certainly too much to require of *LS* a fully developed defence of religious belief in the light of natural evil, a theodicy formulated in the face of long-familiar objections. However, *LS* at least risks giving the impression that it disregards the force of the question. It seems to be turning a blind eye to much in the cosmos and to incline towards an overly romanticised, even a one-eyed, vision as a substitute for the perspicuous reason to which it pays tribute. Evidence for this might be seen in its talk of ‘everything ... as it were, [being] a caress of God’ (84)

or in the assertion of Pope Benedict that 'each of us is the result of a thought of God' (65). How does this ring in the ears of those who have either been victims of the natural order or are the living issue of the violation of a woman's body?

My point is not to question directly the theology of *LS* or to ask whether Christian beliefs should be subject to the adjudication of independent reason. I am thinking of how it all looks on the terms of the synthetic ambition which is explicit in *LS*. To extend the point: those who are well-informed in the Franciscan tradition will doubtless know how to answer the question of whether the ichneumon wasp is brother or sister to Francis and in some manner joined to the divine, but *LS* surely needs at least to gesture explicitly in the direction of that answer for the benefit of those who are deeply imbued with the world-view which is standard in the wake of Darwin.<sup>25</sup> As it is, *LS* has so much interest in promoting the goodness of the world and of God that it risks being read at this point if not as an exercise in avoidance then at least as guilty of it.<sup>26</sup> It seems to me that *LS*'s synthesis of faith and reason is not persuasive to the extent that it gives, or risks giving, this impression.

Á propos the second objection, *LS* says that '[t]he Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge' (80). What does this imply? Does it imply that eschatological optimism is not dependent on the possibility of divine miracle but on some immanent principle in the cosmos, presently hidden, which militates against what science currently tells us about cosmic destiny?<sup>27</sup> As is the case with theodicy, it is certainly too much to require of *LS* a fully developed eschatology. However, when we are witnessing an attempt to synthesise faith and reason, we should surely be given at least some indication of how the action of the Spirit is understood in relation to scientific prognoses. *LS* could not possibly be expected to address the vast general question of the relation of divine action to cosmic process. However, as long as it advocates the synthesis of faith and reason, we need some assurance that rational difficulties involved when talking scientifically about cosmic destiny are taken seriously. True, *LS* assumes that purely rational perception is limited at points where faith attains vision. At the same time, it refuses to pit faith in opposition to reason. Yet, is not the eschatological outlook of *LS* in collision with scientific reason on the question of cosmic destiny? Surely, *LS* needed to exhibit

awareness of that question, whatever measures it took to address it. Since it does not do so, it seems to me that *LS* has not done enough on the eschatological score, any more than on the score of natural evil, to convince us that it embodies a satisfactory synthesis of faith and reason on its own terms. (The 'us' in that sentence is meant to comprehend as wide as possible a religious and non-religious readership.)

These weaknesses are regrettable for two reasons. The first is that some readers may suspect that an unacknowledged streak of irrationality attends the environmental vision afforded to the Christian faith. Whatever we think of Christian appeals to 'reason', either in general or particularly in relation to the environmental concerns of *LS*, we need to avoid giving this impression. The second is that readers who are respectful of the Catholic (or wider Christian) tradition will believe that Pope Francis would most certainly have been able to provide pointers that would prevent the objections from being obstacles to the receipt of his message. We should doubtless be careful not to make too much of the objections, and we should not burden the entire readership of *LS* with a set of questions which, it may be insisted, have arisen prominently within a specifically Western intellectual tradition. However, the post-Christian Western mind-set is rightly in view as *LS* sets out its vision, and its technological will-to-power, for example, is rightly taken to task. Surely its rational objections to religious belief needed more comprehensively to be taken into account. The capacity of *LS* to generate dialogue may not be greatly reduced by weaknesses along the lines which I have suggested. But as long as dialogue is grounded in synthesis, its foundations are somewhat unsteady.

#### 4. A grand unity

Theological syntheses of faith and reason are intertwined with, indeed, rooted in, theological ontologies. The logic of the synthesis in *LS* as I have described it so far does not depend on a particular form of theistic belief. Even so, we shall miss its force if we detach the synthesis from the specific and grand ontological vision entertained by *LS*. It is a vision of profound unity and the epistemology of its synthesis reflects this, correlates with it and is designed to attract a wide readership to the extent that it serves this grand vision. It is a vision of how God and the world are related. Despite the notorious difficulty of defining the term, it seems

fair to describe *LS* as advancing a kind of panentheism, although nothing which I say below hangs on this conceptualisation and it can readily be discarded if desired.<sup>28</sup> According to *LS*, nature is not divine (78) but although ‘the finite things of this world are [not] really divine ... the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that “all things are God” (234).<sup>29</sup> This intimacy lies at the heart of the vision of *LS*.

Critics of the Christian tradition have long argued that an ontological separation of God and the world along the lines of traditional monotheism has had an adverse effect on the care for creation. I do not examine that charge here.<sup>30</sup> Let me simply stipulate that, within a traditional theistic framework, the world as God’s creation is to be valued, loved, cherished, preserved, cultivated, wondered at and found beautiful. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, it is on account of the intrinsic nature of the world. From earliest infancy, it is good that little children experience the beauty of, for example, birds and wildflowers. This is an experience that should be sustained, expanded and intensified in adulthood. Children should learn that these beings are created by God, but they should not be taught that they should be cherished *simply* in virtue of possessing the formal quality of having been made by God. God has bestowed on the lilies of the field their own beauty. God, holy, good and beautiful in his own nature, is capable of creating natures which possess their own beauty.

Secondly, if love for God is the highest and worthiest passion that humans can attain (associated, of course, with the love for the neighbour commanded by Jesus), then love for God flows over into love for what God has created. What is created should therefore be loved both in its intrinsic nature and *qua* having been created by a God who is loved. Doubtless, this state of affairs invites conceptual analysis and a phenomenological account of how such love is experienced. We should need to explore what it means to think of love as a unifying principle from the human side, binding God and the world in a love for both God and the world, which is God’s creation. We ought not to love birds and flowers as we love God, but if the spectre arises of conceiving of those loves in terms of some sort of rivalry, we have robbed love for God *qua* Creator of its proper meaning. In the absence of an attempt to tease out the metaphysics of love, let me just posit this swift and bland account of the love for creation which ought to flourish in a tradi-

tional theistic framework.

Does the account in *LS* show that our appreciation of creation is impoverished if we stop there? In offering its Franciscan vision of panfraternal creation along panentheistic lines, does *LS* confront us with a motivating power, driving us to immersion in ecological concern, which excels anything which arises from my brief and stark observations on behalf of traditional theism?<sup>31</sup> Is it possible for those who part company with the panentheism of *LS* in the name of a traditional theism to agree, nonetheless, that the power of the panentheistic, panfraternal Franciscan vision presented in *LS* is not only unexcelled but even unequalled? I do not think that those who demur from this Franciscan vision can consistently agree that it is unequalled. To believe that this vision is unequalled would be to admit that a correct perception of the relationship of God to the world comes at the price of comparatively diminished emotional and motivating power when it comes to creation care. The love to which Christians are called, which enlightens the eye, moulds the heart, infuses the mind and impels the will to action, is that love which accords with the realities of God, neighbour and world as we understand Scripture to describe them. The power of that love is ultimately generated by its grip on the reality of the order which it apprehends, so we cannot say that the price of seeing the world as it is that we care for it less passionately than we otherwise should. The power of true love lies in the rightness of its apprehension of the relation of God, humans and world. Just as the effectiveness of a laser beam depends on the precision of its penetration and not on the quantum of its undifferentiated energy, so the power of environmental concern and commitment to creation care is strongest when it is directed to cosmic reality precisely as it is.<sup>32</sup>

If Christians who demur from aspects of the ontological outlook evidenced in *LS* should not concede that the power of its vision is *unequalled*, should they nevertheless at least grant that it is *unexcelled*? I do not think that this should be granted either. To believe that an environmental concern is sustained by a degree of theological misapprehension is to believe that it ultimately harbours to a degree a precarious quality. According to *LS*,

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 (11).

This is strong stuff in relation to the language of 'fraternity'. Can it be right? *LS* does not provide us with a clear hermeneutic by which to interpret confidently the meaning of its Franciscan language of personification.<sup>33</sup> We must therefore tread very cautiously in offering critical comment on it. However, suppose that a traditional theist denies that the value and attraction of the sun and moon are necessarily *enhanced* by their personification. Then our theist must also go on to ask whether we actually *detract* from their valuable and attractive character if a proper rendering of that character is actually *dependent* on personification. If personifying language is judged *necessary* because it unsubstitutably corresponds to the way the world is, the value which we ascribe to the world would seem to be dependent on our imparting to it what, from a non-Franciscan point of view, is a superadded quality. Will not *insistence* on personification rob the created order of its capacity to command our concern in its own God-given right?

It is surely hard for those who love and care for creation not to feel the force of the language of *LS*. It is forceful religious language; it impels us to creation care; and creation care is amongst the most important issues of our time. Nonetheless, traditional theists will believe that the ontological proximity of God and human creatures in panentheism does not entail greater spiritual proximity than afforded on the traditional view. If they also protest against the kind of Franciscan conceptuality which informs *LS*, they will also believe that we are not drawn spiritually closer to creation by being drawn into the proximities of a panfraternal outlook.<sup>34</sup> Yet, *LS* should have the penultimate word. It is this: until those who conceive of God's relationship to creation along different lines from *LS* match the passion and power of its concern, their criticism will sound hollow. *LS* presents us with an abiding challenge in this respect. It should also have the last word, to which I now turn.

## 5. Conclusion

My essay has rather shamefully neglected St. Francis, the saint who is 'much loved by non-Christians' (10). He is a standing rebuke to theological traditions which have been weaker on seeing Jesus Christ as human exemplar than on seeing Jesus Christ as divine Saviour. Evangelical Christianity

has rightly criticised the inheritance of nineteenth-century theological Liberalism wherever Jesus as exemplar has supplanted the atoning Saviour and Lord. However, that should lead to re-positioning a theology of Christ as example, not marginalising it. Reflection on Francis points up the inadequacy of a theological or conceptual scheme for motivating us morally. 'Francis of Assisi, more than an idea, is a spirit and a way of life' in whom we encounter 'one of the most joyful syntheses that has been developed in Western Christian culture'.<sup>35</sup>

We need to learn humbly from St. Francis as he is traditionally portrayed. He taught us by his joyous, self-denying example. Usually, we singularly fail to follow his example even at a distance, remaining within the limits of our comfort zone. Our problem in the West is to exemplify a lifestyle which is consistent with our stated environmental concern. Many of us are so trapped in personal consumerism and patterns of mobility that we remain controlled by these things even while we are loudly proclaiming environmental injustices and publicly striving for their removal. Severe material reduction, including, for example, restriction of travel, is a price few of us are willing to pay.

I have touched neither on the sober details with which *LS* documents our dire environmental situation nor on the persistent concern for the poor which it expresses in that context. This is what *LS* is all about, yet it refuses to leave us simply with the big picture. 'An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness' (230). True; and daily simplicity is effective not as a punctuated, episodic phenomenon, but as the expression of sustained, life-long policy.<sup>36</sup> If, as we should, we all accept Francis of Assisi as teacher and example, this need not involve exact imitation of or wholesale agreement with him. However, accepting Francis in that role should go beyond a comfortable acquiescence in the proposition that he 'challenges' us. We cannot ignore him. If we take heed of him, creation – more, the Creator – will be glad.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of The Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (2015). From

- now on, *Laudato Si'* is abbreviated as *LS*. References to its paragraphs will usually be in the text of my article.
- 2 Ottmar Edenhofer and Christian Flaschland, '*Laudato Si'*: Concern for our global commons' in Vincent J. Miller (ed.), *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017) 177-191 (178, 188).
  - 3 Miller, *Theological and Ecological Vision*, 2.
  - 4 Anthony Annett, 'The economic vision of Pope Francis' in Miller, *Theological and Ecological Vision*, 160-174 (161).
  - 5 As I write this article (April, 2019), news of mass arrests at the Extinction Rebellion protests in London are dominating the UK media.
  - 6 In a good general introduction to Bonaventure, Christopher M. Cullen remarks simply that he 'created his own synthesis', *Bonaventure* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 22. On 'Early Franciscan Mysticism and the Synthesis of Bonaventure', see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism - 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998) chapter 2.
  - 7 While I am certainly not crudely characterising the difference between Thomas and Bonaventure in the following terms, it seems to me that those interested in identifying the medieval pedigree of the synthesis in *LS* will find it hard to characterise it dogmatically in terms *either* of faith surpassing *or* of faith fulfilling reason.
  - 8 See, e.g., Roger D. Sorrell, *Saint Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 115-121.
  - 9 *LS* has attracted a range of responses. My reason for not engaging in detailed discussion with them is that I am taking an independent line in this article and not attempting to evaluate those responses on their own terms. Miller, *Theological and Ecological Vision*, is a particularly detailed, full-length response which is partial to *LS*. For an evangelical response, see Jonathan Chaplin, '*Laudato Si'*: Structural Causes of the Ecological Crisis: What Hath Air Conditioning to do with Jerusalem?' <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/laudato-si-structural-causes-of-the-ecological-crisis/> (accessed 05/06/2019). Evangelicals have responded to the ecological crisis for some time, see e.g. Lawrence Osborn, *Guardians of Creation: Nature and theology and the Christian life* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993) and the more recent Cape Town commitment, whose chapter on 'We Love God's World' begins by declaring: '*We love the world of God's creation*': Rose Dowsett (ed.), *The Cape Town Commitment (Study Edition)* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2012) 28 and see 81-84. At least one
  - weighty set of essays incorporating both secular and religious perspectives is due to be published by a major publishing house in 2020.
  - 10 The terms of a theological synthesis are obviously much more detailed than the general word 'harmony' conveys, but we do not need to enter into those terms to understand what *LS* wants to convey to its readership.
  - 11 I have omitted certain words in this sentence and this gives a misleading impression of what it says as a whole, but this does not affect the present point.
  - 12 This is endnote 141. It is the longest endnote in the encyclical and it is distinctive (though strictly not unique) in supplementing the main text of the encyclical with a little additional intellectual substance.
  - 13 See the reference in paragraph 130 to the preceding 'philosophical and theological vision' where faith and reason appear to merge. On the other hand, shortly afterwards talk of 'the respect owed by faith to reason' (132) shows that the distinction is not out of sight.
  - 14 My word 'unity' is studiously vague or ambiguous. It could indicate the belief that philosophy and theology are distinct disciplines but arrive at the same substantive conclusions on a particular matter. Alternatively, it could indicate indifference as to whether a given statement should be labelled as a piece of philosophy or a piece of theology.
  - 15 *LS* later refers to a 'genuine and profound humanism' (181). The work of Jacques Maritain comes to mind, whose *Humanisme intégral* (Paris: Aubier, 1936) was translated into English as *True Humanism* (London: Bles, 1938).
  - 16 While the immediate context of this last phrase is a discussion of global inequality, its application is much wider.
  - 17 'Human ecology also implies ... the relationship between human life and the moral law ...' (155).
  - 18 Of course, this is understood in the traditional sense of the nuclear family grounded in heterosexual marriage and the transgender question is broadly comprehended within this framework (155). See also the observations on femininity, masculinity and difference (155).
  - 19 See also paragraphs 117 and 123 on the worth of the human embryo and abortion. Destruction of unwanted beings (91) may refer either to the embryo or to candidates for euthanasia or to both.
  - 20 See also paragraph 112 on a 'new synthesis'.
  - 21 Water is also called a human right in paragraph 185.
  - 22 Quoting a Canadian conference of bishops, *LS* tells us that '[f]rom panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine' (85).
  - 23 'There is no third (way).'

- 24 Although the power, along with the goodness, of God is implied throughout *LS*, note the particularly strong emphasis on it in paragraphs 73-75.
- 25 We should record that *LS* notes that 'fungi, algae, worms, insects [and] reptiles' play their part in the 'good functioning of ecosystems' (34).
- 26 This is not to deny that the 'fallen' aspect of creation is hinted at in such statements as '[e]ach organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable *in itself...*' (140; my italics). Perhaps the claim that '[e]ach of the various creatures, *willed in its own being*, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness' (69; my italics) is also such a hint. It may be that if we pursued all the references in the endnotes, we might get some way towards gleaning the response implied in *LS* to the familiar difficulties which I have recorded.
- 27 These alternatives need not be exclusive and, in any case, are open to reformulation. Note the positive reference to Teilhard de Chardin in endnote 53, although *LS* does not actually endorse his cosmic speculations.
- 28 For the range of pantheism and complexities of definition, see Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (eds), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). The opening essay in this collection is entitled 'Naming a Quiet Revolution: the Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology'.
- 29 The phrase is that of St. John of the Cross. While *LS* does not endorse it in so many words, it seems clearly to do so by implication.
- 30 *LS* rightly indicates the theological misunderstanding attending the claim that a traditional Judaeo-Christian interpretation of Genesis and care for the environment are ill-wed (67).
- 31 It is possible, of course, to adopt a panfraternal vision of creation without subscribing to panentheism. Panentheism is a way of understanding the world in relation to God; panfraternity is a claim about the internal connections of creation. I associate them here only because *LS* does.
- 32 Elizabeth T. Groppe discusses 'Beauty and Truth' in answer to the question: 'Pope Francis's theology of creation is beautiful – but is it true?' See "'The Love that moves the sun and the stars": A theology of creation' in Miller, *Theological and Ecological Vision*, 77-94 (87).
- 33 I shall not try to quarry the hermeneutic from the text but note that in the very first paragraph of *LS*, the language of sorority and maternity is treated as simile.
- 34 By 'Franciscan' I mean here simply St. Francis of Assisi and by 'spiritually closer' I refer to the loving, warm and caring response of the human spirit to the created order.
- 35 Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation* (London: SCM, 1985) 157 and 29. Boff uses the word 'synthesis' to capture the deep unity and integrity of Francis' life and thought.
- 36 *LS* also rightly commends community actions (232).