

Against piety: The planet, the Pope and *Laudato Si'*

Piety might save the planet – if it were the piety that is a loving respect for the other creatures here, their various ever-threatened habitats and our own better natures. But the piety that holds consecrated officials and their fiat to be beyond criticism is arguably the premier danger the planet faces.

As all eco-warriors and worriers know, the elephant in the room is population growth. Many parts of the world have already overreached their carrying capacity while others support their citizens by climate-destructive importing. This inflicts damage elsewhere through a wasteful contemporary lifestyle involving the consumption of cheap meat, highly processed grains and fossil hydrocarbons. This destruction increases with every human birth. To cite just one figure of many, the population of Africa is predicted to *double* by 2050 (Population Reference Bureau, 2018).

A massive change in infrastructure and habits will only happen slowly and very unevenly. While European cities are starting to invest in new tram systems and vegan restaurants, the formerly poor of China and India crave hamburgers and the family car. Their bikes and largely vegetarian diets are seen as yesterday's habits. So population control and – through time – reduction, via a low birth rate, is an essential eco-political goal.

But there is determined opposition to population control in many places, and, all too often, behind this opposition are religious organizations which license and encourage unlimited population growth. They fight fiercely against the introduction of easy access to, and financing of, birth control measures. The Catholic Church leads the charge on this fight, and its influence as the premier single organized

religious corporation has tended to push other authoritarian religious groups and leaders (such as many ultra-orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Muslims) in the same direction. Sometimes there is even heard the argument that if 'we don't breed, the Catholics will swamp us'. Furthermore, in many countries nationalism is tied to natalism. Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, for example, remarked that, "A woman who abstains from maternity by saying 'I am working' means that she is actually denying her femininity" (quoted in Bruton [2016]). This is the same 'more is better' tack as the Church, but at least the influence of such nationalists is more limited because more local.

Recently, we have seen the Catholic Church in Argentina succeed in keeping abortion illegal (Politi and Londoño, 2018). A *New York Times* article has outlined the great difficulty of obtaining an abortion in Italy, where it is in fact a legal procedure, because of pressure from the Church and its influence over the medical profession (Pianigiani, 2016). Such examples could easily be multiplied. It is the poor and relatively uneducated who take this part of the Catholic message most seriously – those, in fact, with the least resources to nurture eight, nine, ten children.

The Catholic Church, a powerful and authoritarian organization, thus constitutes a serious enemy of attempts to brake population growth and thereby lessen, rather than increase, stress on habitats and biodiversity.

A reason to emphasize this in this particular forum is that the present incumbent – and they have all opposed birth control – cut an environmentalist dash with his first encyclical *Laudato Si': On care for our common home* (Pope Francis,

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2015). Sweeping in scope, at over 80 pages and more than 45,000 words in length, this encyclical ranges over important topics such as urban planning, agriculture, and economic policy. The Pope laments air pollution, climate change, a lack of clean water and damage to biodiversity. “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years,” he tells us (Pope Francis, 2015: §53).

However, at the heart of the encyclical there is also rigid opposition to abortion, embryonic stem cell research and population control. “Since everything is interrelated,” Francis writes, “concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion” (§120). According to the Pope, we cannot “genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties” (§120).

Laudato Si' is thus an eco-sympathetic toffee apple with a poisoned core. Bill McKibben (2015), reviewing it sympathetically in the *New York Review of Books*, tells us:

Francis reportedly has said that the encyclical was not really an environmental document at all. The warming of the planet is a symptom of a greater problem: the developed world's indifference to the destruction of the planet as they pursue short-term economic gains. This has resulted in a ‘throwaway culture’ in which unwanted items and unwanted people, such as the unborn, the elderly, and the poor, are discarded as waste.

There is surely dissimulation in the Pope's position. The same old cruel objection to women having any control over their fertility is buried within a long statement of concern for the wider world of living beings. But the elderly and the poor are not in the same category as the ‘unborn’. Abortion does involve curtailing a *potential* life, but it is a last resort and avoidable where there is easy access to contraception

and contraceptive knowledge – something the Catholic Church has always implacably opposed.

As McKibben puts it, “The real problem, according to Francis, lies in the fact that humans no longer see God as the Creator” (McKibben, 2015). Or put another way, according to the Pope we are destroying the planet and its habitats because much of humanity does not subscribe to Catholicism. On this analysis, the real environmental crisis is one of *belief*. Consumerism, fossil fuel use and corporations get a ticking-off in *Laudato Si'*, but if we all listened to and obeyed the Holy Father and rediscovered the Catholic faith then environmental destruction would go away.

The Pope's teachings thus reduce to this contradictory claim: ‘Let us look after the planet and the other beings – but human populations must grow without hindrance’. Of course a man of religion might, like the White Queen of Looking Glass Land, believe as many as six (or even just two) impossible things before breakfast (Carroll, 1978: ch. 5), but this viewpoint is a death sentence for many endangered species, apart from the cruelties of overpopulation for human communities.

Francis's occasional nice words about migrants and even victims of clerical child abuse should not lead us to wishful thinking, and casting him as a hero. To return to the point with which I began, the core problem is this very piety and ‘hands off’ attitude – holding his words and the teachings of his organization as either beyond criticism or, at least, as better left un-criticized. Such piety blocks one of the most important escape routes from our human-made ecological crisis.

I hope we can be brave eco-citizens and name and shame this large self-serving organization whose campaign against any form of population control compounds all the ill effects of big fossil fuel, big auto, big palm oil and so on – because all these things are driven by humans as consumers. ■

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