



COMMENTARY

Religious Biodiversity and Our Common Home

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Pope Francis's ecological muse in his 2015 encyclical on climate change and inequality is also his namesake. The pope begins his letter with lines from a canticle attributed to the long departed friar from Assisi. The saint is the first to evoke our human sisterhood with the feminized figure of our planet.¹ But the pope's subsequent admonishments are contemporary, and his own: "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her" (§2). Our violation of her gendered body—to her detriment, as well as our own—is the central subject of the pope's lamentation. And it is the figure of Saint Francis, filled with a love for all creatures, who models another possible world for the pope.

Saint Francis, however, is a complex figure. One can see, in his passionate love for other creatures, the flicker of a desire to convert and domesticate them. The creatures who populate the body of this feminized sister Earth are also conscripted for the Father's kingdom. The pope marvels at the saint's commitment to commune with other creatures—one that even drew him to preach to the flowers, calling them to praise his Lord (§11). While this certainly illustrates the nature and extent of the saint's connection with the nonhuman, it also (as I have put it elsewhere) illuminates in him "the glimmer of a missionary evangelist to another continent."² It is not merely the case that Saint Francis tells us (the humans) that these flowers reveal the glory of the Lord.

1. The line he uses, specifically, is this one: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us" (Saint Francis, quoted in Francis, *Laudato si'*, §1; hereafter cited by section number in the text).

2. Marovich, "When Death Became a Creature," 107.

Rather, he takes this further: he wants the flowers to speak in his language and to humbly praise the Lord who gave them their glory. He wants their conversion.

The Christian tradition that Francis (saint or pope) represents is politically powerful. It is a tradition whose entanglements with imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy (among other things) are deep and intricate. While it is clear in his encyclical that the pope is advocating for the preservation of biological diversity, it is less clear that he is concerned with the preservation of what ecofeminist theologian and Brazilian nun Ivone Gebara calls “religious biodiversity.”³ It is the pope’s attention to, his lack of attention to, and his ultimate dependence upon religious biodiversity that I want to highlight in my response to his encyclical.

Like biological and cultural diversity, the religious diversity toward which Gebara gestures is meant to be a recognition of the highly variegated modes of life’s organization—down to the fleeting, intimate, ethereal, and least visible registers of the spiritual. “The vital diversity of meanings has always been present in human history,” says Gebara. But we also know that human groups have trouble recognizing the fragility, or partiality, of their own frameworks for value and instead “tend to absolutize them as supreme verities.” This drives religion, Gebara argues, to play “the game of proselytism and power tactics.”⁴ This often leaves those outside a powerful and organized religious grouping vulnerable—as we see when we look at the spread of religion through processes of colonization. History indicates, says Gebara, that when colonialists “appropriated a given territory, colonial systems took over the people as well, destroying traditional beliefs and seeking to impose their own.” This is not merely a cultural destruction, she argues, but a form of environmental degradation. “The destruction of the earth is accompanied by the destruction of the belief systems that link this particular people with this particular geographical area.”⁵ More than the loss of belief systems, of course, processes of colonization also eroded ritual practices, material objects associated with worship patterns, and cosmological frameworks that illuminated forms of connection between a people and a given territorial location.

Gebara also notes that religious biodiversity is not merely marked in the variegated differentiations and distinctions between religious systems and frameworks. Just as there is biodiversity within a family,⁶ there is biodiversity within religious traditions. For Gebara, gender difference marks a particularly acute form of difference within the Christian tradition. Feminist thinkers like Gebara have carved out still-fragile and tenuous spaces in which to think differently about doctrine in this tradition, and this should be seen as a form of religious biodiversity—a pattern for thinking that supports the

3. Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 205.

4. *Ibid.*, 206.

5. *Ibid.*

6. As Gebara puts it, “Biodiversity can obviously be observed within every family, in the way each child is different, in the variety of likes and dislikes in food, in affinities, in temperaments, and so on” (*Longing for Running Water*, 208).

lifeways of differently gendered bodies within a tradition and the distinct relation to doctrine that these bodies model and generate. Ultimately, for Gebara, an (environmental) ethic that attends to religious biodiversity will promote or imply “an attitude of humility” that recognizes that “there cannot be absolute powers that regulate and dictate the meaning of life, or the art of meaning.”⁷

The pope is arguably humble as he approaches his audience and readership. Pope Francis is, of course, speaking to an audience that extends (ambitiously) beyond Catholics or even Christians. He wants his encyclical to be a dialogue with “all people” about “our common home” (§3). And, indeed, it would even seem that his choice of Saint Francis as muse for this particular project is not unrelated to the fact that Saint Francis (the “patron saint of ecology”) has interreligious and secular appeal. Saint Francis is, says the pope, “much loved by non-Christians” (§10). The pope seems to view his text as an “ethical and spiritual itinerary” (§15) that can be made broadly available. He does, however, recognize the discursive and practical limits of his own tradition. He presents his ethical and spiritual resources for the environmental crisis as being “some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of the Christian experience” (§15). This is not, he seems to acknowledge, a unified program for all people. Rather, what he brings to the table is something more like a set of gems from a tradition that he knows intimately and deeply values.

The pope also makes an effort to set the Christian tradition in resonance with other religions, particularly monotheistic religions. At numerous points in the text, he names the values he cites as pulling from not merely the Christian tradition but the wider Judeo-Christian tradition. He labels his references—for instance, to creation and nature in the texts of Genesis and Exodus—as pulling from this broader heritage.⁸ He also ends the encyclical with two prayers. One is explicitly meant for Christians and evokes the figure of Jesus. The other is a monotheistic prayer with, one might imagine, a broader liturgical application.

Finally, Francis does emphasize the importance of *cultural* diversity for the ecological crisis. Given the complexity of this crisis and the multiple causes of it, he writes, “We need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality” (§63). He recognizes, like Gebara, that the destruction of culture is also a form of environmental degradation. Along with the threat to nature, Francis notes, “there is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat. This patrimony is part of the shared identity of each place and a foundation on which to build a city” (§143). His sense of ecological ethics, then, involves not just a concern for biodiversity outside human cultural environments but also “protecting the cultural treasures of humanity

7. *Ibid.*, 210.

8. See, for instance, his discussion in Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality*, §46.

in the broadest sense.” Culture, says Francis, “is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment” (§143). One might imagine that, for instance, colonialist degradation of cultural biodiversity might be part of the “ecological debt” that Francis argues developed countries have yet to pay the developing world (§51).

To what extent, however, does Francis see theological language and religious ritual implicated in this rich and wild diversity of human cultural heritage, the art and poetry of human interior life? When he emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity, does he understand religious language, religious ritual, and religious doctrine to be implicated in this biodiversity? Or does he understand the world of doctrine to transcend these registers of the natural? Francis sees himself as speaking outward to a diverse population, from within the bounded limits of his Christian tradition. And he does make gestures toward other religious traditions and cultural heritages. Still, there is a strain of doctrinal fixity within his encyclical that—if amplified—might mute any religio-spiritual perspective or practice that does not harmonize neatly with his own.

Francis is, for example, clear about his claims for the absolute universality of God’s reality. While he does argue that a range of spiritual perspectives might be necessary to confront the ecological crisis, he is also clear in his position that “a spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable.” If this doctrinal focus is lost, he argues, “this is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot.” While he may appreciate diverse spiritual heritages on some levels, he is clear in his own position that “the best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality” (§75).

This clear emphasis on the divine patriarch would, of course, directly contrast with the theological perspectives developed in recent decades by feminist and gender-queer thinkers within Christian thought and within monotheistic intellectual traditions more broadly. These are the biodiverse perspectives within traditions that Gebara is concerned will be silenced through the powerful authority of a globalized patriarchal Christian heritage. One can, perhaps, hear the pope’s implicit critique of these theological positions in his claims that—for instance—an ecological ethic and a spirituality that works in concert with it would be certain to “value one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity” as a “necessary” condition for recognizing oneself in “an encounter with someone who is different” (§155). Francis does not take cues, here, from the biodiversity of the natural world, which does not adhere to the heteronormative human social dynamics to which he makes reference. Rather than cultivate an appreciation and respect for the wild and rich diversity of human bodies—with shapes, forms, and gender identities that refuse to conform to a transcendent or supernatural notion of either

masculinity or femininity—he seems to be arguing that an ecologically attuned form of thinking would adhere to a rigid gender binary. It would seem, in other words, that when the messiness of sexual and gender difference begins to cultivate forms of religio-spiritual biodiversity, Francis wants to suggest that this is somehow not part of a sustainable future. It is in this sense, perhaps, that his position in this encyclical fore-closes most clearly on what Gebara has called religious biodiversity.

Ultimately, however, Francis's doctrinal focus on creation and the mutuality of creatureliness rises and falls on the generation of distinct (often contradictory) doctrinal positions within a tradition whose belief structures are often understood to be fixed, firm, and uniform in their orthodoxy. Francis, in other words, relies on religious biodiversity himself when he pulls from or capitalizes on the internal heterodoxy of the tradition. He acknowledges that Christian positions on the nature and importance of the created world have varied somewhat radically. For him, this is because of a wrongheaded interpretation of doctrine that has played out in history. "It is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures," he notes, and he even seems to acknowledge that what he considers bad readings of the tradition continue to perpetuate: "Nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute dominion over other creatures," he argues (§67). Francis is urging a reading of scripture and tradition that, even twenty years ago, would have seemed like a minority interpretation⁹ into the mainstream. And he seems to depend upon the evolutionary change that comes with the almost spontaneous generation of biodiverse positions within religious life to do this.

More than this, Francis himself argues that the *interdependence* of creatures is something God-given—something that has existed since time immemorial. He speaks about creaturely dependence as the dependence of creatures on *one another*. "Creatures exist only in dependence on each other," he writes, "to complete each other, in the service of each other" (§86). To hear this description of creaturely life from the writ of the pope himself seems to give a kind of timelessness to this articulation of creaturely dependence. But for centuries of Christian theological thought, *creaturely dependence* was merely the dependence of mortal and vulnerable creatures on the immortal and invulnerable creator.

For many centuries, Christian theologians were entirely uninterested in the nature of interdependent relations among creatures themselves. It was crucial to stress the

9. One need only look, for instance, to Lynn White Jr.'s famous 1967 essay for a critique of Christian habits of thought and their impact on the environment. White argues that Christianity is an origin point for, rather than a resource for combating, environmental crisis. For White, Francis models a deeply uncommon approach to nature and other creatures within the Christian tradition. While White has certainly had his fair share of critics, his essay does illustrate the extent to which mainstream mid-twentieth-century Christian perspectives were often understood to be more hostile toward ecological thinking than host to it. See White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

sovereignty of God and the vertical form of dependence that left creatures in the thrall of this power. In this sense, then, Francis sounds a bit less orthodox. His emphasis on interdependence sounds, for instance, less like the fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo, who spoke of our creaturely dependence on God as so radical that he bears us up “even down to our grey hairs”¹⁰ and charged that although the breasts of his mother and nursemaids “sustained [him] by the consolation of woman’s milk” when he was merely an infant, it was “neither [his] mother nor [his] nurses” who “filled their own breasts” but instead this was God’s milk, working “through them.”¹¹ Instead, Francis begins to sound a bit more like the obscure early modern English philosopher Anne Conway—a Quaker, interested in the Lurianic Kabbalah as well as animal physiology. Conway argued that there was such a degree of interdependence and mutuality in creaturely life that “one cannot live without the other.” Indeed, she prodded, “what creature in the entire universe can be found that does not need its fellow creatures? Certainly none.”¹² Perhaps, then, Francis’s own emphasis on creaturely interdependence is more dependent upon the internal complexity and biodiversity of his own tradition than it might, at first, appear.

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10. See Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.16.31.

11. *Ibid.*, 1.6.7.

12. Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 55.