

The Pope and the Religious Naturalist

Our Ecomoral Common Ground

Ursula Goodenough  
UU Society of Martha's Vineyard  
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I am a microbiologist who calls herself a non-theistic religious naturalist  
<http://religious-naturalist-association.org>

My core narrative is the naturalistic worldview, based on the discoveries of contemporary science, to which I develop religious responses.

The theistic religious groundings of Pope Francis are very different from my groundings. Yet we share a common passion: love and care for the Earth. This morning I will compare our earthly perspectives, which turn out to be deeply similar.

In his lyrical and pathbreaking 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Francis focuses on two topics:

First, the particular ways that the planet is now in distress (rapid warming, pollution, oceans, drinking water, etc.) and recommendations for their remediation.

Second, a call to heed these recommendations in the Christian context that God, as Creator of All, directs us to “tend and keep the garden” (*Genesis 2:15*).

I am also called to tend and keep the garden, but the call comes from my naturalist and existential understandings. Importantly, Francis makes clear that his encyclical is addressed to “all people of good will” and not just “believers,” and asserts that “whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.”

The worldview of the Christian religion is embedded in text and tradition, while the naturalist worldview is a work in progress, continuously deepening as discoveries are made about the nature and history of the cosmos, the planet, life, and the human.

Most gratifying to me is that Pope Francis specifically lifts up the naturalist worldview on six occasions in his 40,000-word document:

1. We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.
2. Although change is part of the working of complex systems, the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution.
3. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation....
4. A good part of our genetic code is shared by all living beings.
5. Many people realize that we live and act on the basis of a reality that has previously been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities.
6. The good functioning of ecosystems also requires fungi, algae, worms, insects, and an innumerable variety of microorganisms.

These passages, while minimalist, capture key features of naturalist understandings: that our universe is constituted of matter, time, and space, and that biological evolution occurs slowly over time and employs a common genetic code.

Hence I come away from the *Laudato Si'* with the sense that Francis, who was trained as a chemist, has taken these naturalist understandings deeply into his mind and heart. They undergird and pulse throughout his writings. He gets it. The fact that he also holds additional beliefs that I don't share – beliefs about a Creator God and an afterlife – is, to my mind, incidental to these shared perspectives.

Francis repeatedly lifts up two core understandings of the natural world: we are interrelated and we are interdependent.

Here are some examples:

- In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation.
- Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.
- Just as the different aspects of the planet – physical, chemical and biological – are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network that we will never fully explore and understand.
- Ecological conversion entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion.

I am reminded here of the writings of the Catholic cultural historian Thomas Berry, whose haunting phrases include these:

- The universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.
- Existence itself is derived from and sustained by this intimacy of each being with every other being in the universe.

Francis richly expands the interrelatedness theme to emphasize that we humans are also interrelated and that our responsibilities also extend to one another in what he calls an “integral ecology.” He writes:

- We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.
- A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.... Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.
- There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.

This emphasis echoes the theme of his earlier 2013 encyclical, with its impassioned call for economic and political justice and attention to the poor, wherein he offers the scathing question: “How is it not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?”

The connection is brought home here:

- This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).

Accompanying the pope's extensive documentation of the ways that our common home has been compromised and degraded by human activity is a call that we put an end to such activity, that we adopt what some of us are calling an ecomorality.

Francis pulls no punches in calling out humans for our immoral treatment of the planet. Here are two examples:

- Sister Earth 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. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.
- All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution.... Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress that has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.

Religious naturalists lift up two “motivators” for adopting such an ecomoral trajectory.

One centers on the fact that humans evolved within the primate lineage, which is intensely social. This means that traits conducive to generating a flourishing community are inherent in our makeup and can be cultivated, by education, to motivate our decisions. As the concept of community is expanded to include its planetary context, these same social traits can, and I would say must, be engaged.

A related but distinctive approach is called virtue ethics. The basic idea is that the virtuous person feels like doing the right thing. Virtues are ideals, visions of the good, that humans value and seek to attain. They are ways that we can't think better than. A powerful example is given by the woman who took great risks to shelter Jews in Holland during WWII. Her comment: “I don't think it was such a courageous thing to do. For certain people it is a self-evident thing to do.”

A core theme in Judeo/Christian ethics is the assumption that humans are inherently prone to sin and that this is held in check by a desire to acquire the favor of God, a desire that motivates moral behavior. But to my ear, Francis is most often calling to us not in the voice of sin and salvation but in the voice of virtue ethics. Indeed, he extolls the bishops of Brazil for asking that we cultivate the “ecological virtues.”. Some examples:

- If we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.
- We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one that approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next.

This invocation of an attitude of the heart, of approaching life with serene attentiveness, calls to mind the Eastern concept of Mindfulness, which can be defined as follows:

- Mindfulness is knowledge or wisdom that pulls the whole mind-and-heart of the knower towards a connection with the way things are all their exciting particularity. You cannot be mindful and know things in a purely academic way; as you become mindful of something, your feelings and your behavior towards it are transformed.

While the pope does not use the word, I hear the Mindfulness concept in the following:

- Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.
- Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience...  
We cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and a spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.

Mindfulness is receptive to all forms of wisdom, scientific and cultural, where the traditional religions, a vibrant component of our culture and our cultural evolution, are very much included. Francis echoes this sentiment:

- 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.
- Religious classics can prove meaningful in every age; they have an enduring power to open new horizons... Is it reasonable and enlightened to dismiss certain writings simply because they arose in the context of religious belief? ... 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.

Let me close by reading portions of the elegant and loving homily offered by Pope Francis to Saint Francis in this encyclical, which captures the essence of the mindful, virtuous, ecological beings that the pope insists that we strive to become.

I believe that Saint Francis, who lived 800 years ago, is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology.

He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature, and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

Francis helps us to see that an 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. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason”. His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists....

Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices that determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, 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.

By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.

The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled....

Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.