Pope Francis: Prophet and Priest in the Anthropocene

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One of the most significant aspects of Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si’,* is that it is a deep cry of the heart: *Laudato si’, Praise be!* My central argument in this paper is that this cry stems from Pope Francis’s charism as a prophet and priest in the epoch of the Anthropocene. The rhetoric of “irreversible changes” to the earth that is implied by the idea of the Anthropocene has struck a cultural chord way beyond its original geological scientific home by generating ongoing and heated debates in the environmental humanities. There are negative aspects in using such a term that Pope Francis manages to avoid by eschewing its use. In particular, narratives about the Anthropocene offer ambiguous portrayals of the place of humanity on the earth that has important ethical and religious consequences. These narratives edge towards a philosophical scientism beyond the confines of the geological science where the term originated. In this sense, on the one hand, they are ‘naturalistic’ in being derived from the natural sciences. On the other hand, Anthropocene narratives are also about the dominance of human beings on planet earth, hence eclipsing the category of the natural world as ‘other’

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1 This paper was first delivered as a lecture at Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven on 16th February 2017, as an integral part of the interdisciplinary expert seminar on *Laudato si’,* supported by the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD), KU Leuven and the Center for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Durham University. § embedded in the text refers to *Laudato si’* (LS). Some of this paper derives from Celia Deane-Drummond, “Pope Francis: Priest and Prophet in the Anthropocene”, *Environmental Humanities* 8 no. 2 (2016) 256-262. See also Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann and Markus Vogt, eds., *Religion in the Anthropocene* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017).


to humanity, a distinction that has been integral to many secular and religious concepts of environmental protection. Pope Francis offers, instead, a different kind of social imaginary. The whole point of the encyclical is about how humanity has failed to meet our human responsibilities to people and to the planet, how to address that failure, and how all this can ultimately be reconciled with a belief in God who is Creator and redeemer of the world. In keeping with Roman Catholic social thought, Pope Francis retains the special place of humanity on the earth, while resisting human domination of the world around us. He portrays a different vision of human distinctiveness that is based on love rather than power over the natural world. He does not reject either science or technology, but is acutely aware of their limitations. Pope Francis does not simply re-hash traditional Roman Catholic social teaching, there are also new elements in *Laudato si* which stem from his own particular background as the first Latin American, the first Jesuit, and the first Pope in history to take the name of the patron saint of ecology, Francis of Assisi.

The Anthropocene Context

So, what on earth is the Anthropocene – *The Age of Humans* - all about? The Anthropocene idea is generally attributed to the Nobel prize-winning Dutch atmospheric chemist, Paul Jozef Crutzen, who began using this language together with American biologist Eugene Stoermer at the International Biosphere-Geosphere Program (IBGP) that met near Mexico City at the turn of the new millennium in the year 2000.\(^5\) Russian scientists in the 1960s had raised the possibility of using this term for a new geological epoch, but at this stage it never captured either the scientific or the public imagination. Scientifically it is about the extent of human activity that leaves a permanent human signature on both the geo-chemical-biological systems of the earth and the earth’s crust.\(^6\) There are continued debates among different scientists from different related fields as to what the term *Anthropocene* might signify in geological terms. The dividing line generally falls between geologists and ecologists who pitch for what could be termed the Anthropocene ‘spike,’ signifying changes beginning since the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, and those, mostly archeological anthropologists, who press for a much earlier start, some 60,000 years ago, at the dawn of human agriculture after the migration of our earliest ancestors from the

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African subcontinent. Which time is picked is not going to make much
difference in terms of how human impact eventually looks on a geological
scale when viewing the earth's crust in the very long term, but it does
make a significant difference in how the Anthropocene is perceived. If it
is identified with the much longer period of history associated with post-
agricultural humanity as such, then all humans who have ever lived
since the start of agriculture are caught up in this epoch, which in effect
collapses into the Holocene. If the start date of the Anthropocene is much
later, then only a much narrower proportion of humans are held re-

sponsible for any impacts, even though the term itself implies diachronic
inclusivity. The fact that there can be such debates implies that there are
factors other than scientific ones in helping to shape decisions about
what the nomenclature of the Anthropocene means, and this, as I will
argue below, is very significant from a religious and ethical perspective.

Paul Crutzen as the originator of the term in more recent times names the
start of the Age of Humans as coincident with the invention of the con-
densing steam engine by James Watt in the 18th C, a process that consumed
vast quantities of coal that then sparked the industrial revolution. He
argues that there is a second period of intensification after the 1950s, where
there are exponential rises in human-induced (anthropogenic) impacts, not
just in terms of greenhouse gas production, such as carbon dioxide or
methane, but also a whole host of other threats to the earth’s environment
as well, such as the rise in atmospheric nuclear isotopes, drastic loss of
biodiversity, melting of the cryospheres (permanent ice caps), rise in CFCs
and so on. The resulting breakdown of these once stable Earth System
states is captured in the planetary boundaries model that often accom-
panies rhetoric on the Anthropocene. Climate change in the planetary
boundaries model is not the only factor under consideration, even if it is one
of the most important. In this case the earth’s function is viewed through
nine distinct planetary boundaries that are either exceeded or under threat
of being breached by human activity. Swedish environmental scientist
Johan Rockström, who is director of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, first
advocated the planetary boundaries model together with American chemist
Will Steffen from the Australian National University. Significantly, Will

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Steffen is also a co-author with Paul Crutzen, showing clearly how the two concepts about the Earth System, namely, the Anthropocene and planetary boundaries, are considered part and parcel of the same process.

What is missing in this framework, and in the broader Anthropocene narrative more generally, is any sense of disproportionate human responsibility for such planetary threats. This is particularly true of the interpretation of the Anthropocene as a post-industrial event or events, where only some, rather than all humans, are responsible for the severity of the impacts. The planetary boundaries approach also reinforces a strong sense of collective threat without adjudicating precisely which persons are contributing to that threat the most. Criticism of the planetary boundaries model, at least in its original formulation, has therefore come from those working with impoverished communities. However, Oxfam director Kate Raworth was not so much exercised by the disproportionate impacts of some human activities and some human groups over others as the fact that within the planetary model itself the Earth System fails to take into account human needs. She therefore modifies the model by arguing for a “safe and just operating space for humanity” without sufficiently fundamentally challenging its philosophy and premises.\textsuperscript{10} Hence, the Raworth “doughnut” model alongside Anthropocene rhetoric generates an epistemology that seems to be founded on scientific knowledge, but has implications well beyond it. If the planetary boundaries model is used in order to structure discourse on the ethics of sustainability it needs to remain far more mindful of these limits. In this respect it is analogous to an equally powerful model that is still popular among some scientists, social scientists and theologians, namely, James Lovelock’s \textit{Gaia}. But Gaia at least has the benefit of incorporating the agency of the sum total of the biota of the natural world and not just focusing on human activity.

I am attempting in this paper to show how Pope Francis speaks into this concern of captivating cosmologies like Gaia and its newer cousin, the Anthropocene, and its articulation in practical policy as expressed through planetary boundaries frameworks. Even though he avoids using these terms, his strong criticism of the epistemic power of science and technology that have gripped the imagination of the most powerful nations of the world is highly relevant to this discussion. Crutzen’s Anthropocene rhetoric in particular generates a new kind of social

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{10} Kate Raworth, “A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can We Live Within the Doughnut?” \textit{Oxfam Policy and Practice: Climate Change and Resilience} 8 no. 1 (2012) 1–26.
imaginary, following Charles Taylor\textsuperscript{11}, and it is one that also has apocalyptic character in generating a horizon of extreme risk. While Charles Taylor confined his definition of social imaginary to the human sphere, the Anthropocene, in bringing the human into the biospheric and geological models of the earth, in effect creates a \textit{bio-social} and \textit{bio-political} imaginary where once held distinctions between humanity and the natural world no longer apply. This has crucial implications for defining moral action.

In the first place, Crutzen’s ethical stance in the wake of such threats is illuminating. He argues that humanity needs to acquire \textit{even greater} technical skill in the management of the planet and its future. Crutzen calls, therefore, for active geo-engineering of the atmosphere in order to reduce solar radiation. His scientific insights about what is happening to planet earth therefore lead to specific technological proposals about how to ‘fix’ the pending threats to the stability of the Earth System. His specific proposal is through use of atmospheric sulphur in order to reflect sunlight\textsuperscript{12}. Yet, such suggestions bypass any awareness of the \textit{social milieu} and social structures in which decisions are made: in other words the problem is framed as a scientific one to be solved by yet more technology. Secondly, for social scientists like Alf Hornberg and his colleague Andreas Malm, the broad sweep generated through scientifically constructed Anthropocene narratives undercuts a critical exploration of economically and politically driven social structures, and, assuming a late date, fails to place the blame where it is due, namely, a small proportion of post-industrial humans.\textsuperscript{13}

One ethical reaction to the Anthropocene narratives is to argue for resistance against its implied norms: the story itself is suggestive of human domination that needs to be countered by a more respectful ethic of restraint. If the first Copernican revolution, in the popular imagination at least, de-centered humanity as at the center of the universe, the

\textsuperscript{11} Charles Taylor, \textit{Modern Social Imaginaries} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Taylor does not refer to the Anthropocene as he wrote this book prior to its rise in public popularity. His definition of social imaginary is worth citing “By social imaginary I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”, 23.


Anthropocene is likened to a second Copernican revolution that seems to put humanity back into planetary history.\(^{14}\) Hans Schellnhuber, who, interestingly, was also one of Pope Francis’s scientific advisors,\(^{15}\) argues for the need for heightened human control over the earth through greater scientific knowledge of climate science, better climate and geological modeling and global meteorological governance. The so-called eco-modernists also situate themselves here, pressing for more technological control, rather than less.\(^{16}\)

Here I align with philosopher Maria Antonaccio who argues powerfully that the Anthropocene is, at the deepest level, also an implicit religious narrative and not just a moral one- a good or bad Anthropocene.\(^{17}\) It is religious because it undercuts belief in the otherness of the natural world. So, the earth in the dominant Anthropocene rhetoric has now become humanized and is no longer recognized as a distinct “other” to be reckoned with. Antonaccio spells this out in the following way:

\(^{14}\) H. J. Schellnhuber, ““Earth System” Analysis and the Second Copernican Revolution”, Nature 402 Supplement (1999) C19- C23. He was one of the advisors of Pope Francis, though Pope Francis avoids using the term Anthropocene. Michael Northcott also draws on this idea in his discussion of the Anthropocene in Michael Northcott, “On Going Gently into the Anthropocene”, in Religion in the Anthropocene, eds. Deane-Drummond et al, 2017, 19-34. Historically, of course, it can be doubted that the Copernican revolution that shifted a geocentric view to a heliocentric view really did de-center humanity in the way implied in both these interpretations. Prior to the Copernican discoveries the earth was thought of as central in the universe, but the earth in such a position accumulated negative forces, and represented heaviness rather than greatness, thus not implying that the earth was of central significance. The perception of humanity as losing its greatness once it becomes dwarfed in a heliocentric universe is also a fallacy, since smallness in size is not equated with insignificance, particularly in this historical period. Perhaps, we could say rather more accurately from a historical perspective that humanity has always been held in high esteem, but that the popular myths surrounding the impact on that sense of supremacy through Copernican science are no longer convincing. But that means, of course, that the dangers inherent in anthropocentrism that Pope Francis is aware of start to come to the surface. See, in particular, a discussion in Dennis R. Danielson, “Myth 6: That Copernicanism Demoted Humans From the Center of the Cosmos”, in R. Numbers, ed. Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion (Cambridge/Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009) 50-58.

\(^{15}\) Pope Francis distinguishes between the scientific advice he has gained from climate scientists and their particular approaches to solving climate change problems through geo-engineering. Pope Francis avoids using the term geo-engineering and speaks more broadly of the dangers of belief that technology alone can solve social problems.

\(^{16}\) See collection of open access essays edited by Eileen Crist and Thom van Dooren devoted to a critique of The Ecomodernist Manifesto in Environmental Humanities 7 no. 1 (2015).

\(^{17}\) Maria Antonaccio, “De-moralizing and Re-moralizing the Anthropocene”, in Deane-Drummond et. al., Religion in the Anthropocene, 2017, 121-137.
“The debate deserves to be called “quasi-theological” because Nature (especially in the American context) has long been understood as a site of otherness that exists beyond human control, desires, and interests. In this respect, it has functioned as a kind of God-term (i.e., a signifier of ultimate value or meaning) that has exerted an “oppositional power” to human dominance and pretense.”

This humanization of the natural world thus takes away one of the central claims of many indigenous religious traditions that believe that the natural world has a distinct presence and agency. So, for them, the Anthropocene will most likely seem like a colonizing and perhaps even a colonial construct, predicated on specific Western scientific understandings of humanity’s place of dominance in the world.

The idea of Nature as presence has also been central for secular concepts of environmental ethics, especially those that draw on the quasi-religious traditions of American naturalists and environmental activists like Wendell Berry, Henry Thoreau and John Muir. It is this combination of socio-political and religious importance that is so important. So:

“Practically and politically speaking, this idea of Nature has provided the impetus for the protection of wilderness areas and many other environmental and legislative initiatives. Religiously and theologically speaking, it has often functioned (particularly in the American context) as the signifier of a transcendent Other that dispossesses the self of its false sense of sovereignty and makes possible a reorientation of humanity’s place in the world”.

And for monotheistic faiths such as Christianity, the Anthropocene does not simply de-sacralize the natural world, rather it undercuts any belief in the earth as a divine gift, for now knowledge about that earth and what to do about it comes under the umbrella of scientific explanation. The earth, and our future in it, is, according to dominant Anthropocene narratives, captured in the story of human domination of our planet.

**Pope Francis as Prophet**

Attempting to work out humanity’s place on that earth, how to perceive what it means to be human, where we have gone wrong, in particular the spiritual roots of the crisis we are in, our obsession with technologies as the means to solve our problems, critical engagement with dominant socio-economic norms, along with working out what our specific social

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responsibilities might be, is at the heart of Pope Francis’ message. I am naming him therefore as prophet in the Anthropocene. I am arguing that he speaks not just to the literal and rather more obvious environmental concerns about human dominance and climate change, but also to the underlying and very often somewhat disguised social imaginary that is at its heart. He therefore begins with a different kind of narrative, one that is modeled on the emulation of a particular human, Francis of Assisi, rather than taking its bearings in the first instance from scientific epistemologies that all too quickly, as the Anthropocene narratives show, escape their originating scientific frameworks.

His personal determination to grant due attention to poverty, peace-making, and creation comes through strongly in *Laudato si’*, regardless of the consequences. This abandonment to his mission is also prophetic and single minded. His encyclical discusses more scientific data than any other encyclical thus far, including the loss of biodiversity, climate change, agriculture, impacts of pollution, and water resources. But he frames this in an alternative cosmology that speaks of the earth as our common home as a gift of God. Hence, Pope Francis does not simply absorb the mandate of scientists. Hans Schellnhuber is a case in point in that he was an advisor to the Vatican. Pope Francis recognizes the importance of climate modeling and the evidence for anthropogenic climate change, but he strongly rejects Schellnhuber’s stress on human control of the climate by an educated elite. Pope Francis’ scientific discussion is measured and in line with the overall consensus found in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that are relatively conservative in their estimates of climate change. His message is far more radical than that of Schellnhuber, since Pope Francis invites a *cultural revolution* (§114) requiring changes in patterns of consumption and lifestyle. He certainly takes note of the science, but refuses to allow it to control his approach to the natural world, so “Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion” (§76).

Unlike climate social advocates such as Bill McGibben, Pope Francis also does not actively encourage civil disobedience. Rather, he is

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21 Schellnhuber, “Earth System Analysis”.
concerned with the reform of legal authority, rather than active, illegal resistance (§142). He bemoans the lack of political will in global agreements and recent World Summits, anticipating the Paris meeting in late 2015 (§166) and calling for civil society to employ “legitimate means of pressure” in order to bring about change (§38). In this sense he is no extremist, but his is still a prophetic voice in his context as primate of 1.2 billion Roman Catholics worldwide.

While Pope Francis’s message seeks to push the global community within the limits of legal authority, he retains a traditional Catholic view on the dignity of the human person. His approach to the doctrine of creation is also traditional, so affirming the idea of “laws of nature” (§68) that he understands as inherent laws put in place by the Creator (§69). Although he avoids the term “natural law,” his position on the absolute worth of each and every person is in line with traditional views on both human dignity and the human family (§50). He refuses, for example, to blame population growth for extreme environmental challenges facing the global commons, and insists that the root cause is related to an undue attachment to what he terms the technocratic paradigm and unfettered habits of over consumption (§109). Yes, there are areas where he could have gone much further, including tackling important questions on gender inequity, and addressing the population issue more openly with respect to the very real scientific limits of the carrying capacity of the planet quite regardless of overall consumption rate, but the point is that he creates a different kind of ethical framework from the technological paradigm that is beloved of the dominant Anthropocene advocates. He also refuses to believe that an unregulated market economy is sufficient to meet the deep social challenges facing the human community. For him “by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion” (§109). Pope Francis expends most of his energy on challenging the established norms of a globalized market economy that he believes provide the structural basis for ecological sin. The epistemological framing of market economics through quantification and data analysis may be one more reason why Pope Francis bewails what seems to be the dominance of scientifically driven epistemologies.

23 By this I mean that if each human person, theoretically at least, consumed just sufficient of the earth’s goods so as to live a reasonably healthy life, the overall loss in resources on planet earth would not, at least in current conditions of resource use, be sustainable, understood as not leading to degradation over time. This may be one reason perhaps why scientists press for innovation, since they are aware of the mismatch between what is taken out of the earth compared with what is available in the short and long term. The difficulty, as I have indicated earlier, is that the ‘solution’ based approach fails to dig deeper into the presumed bio-social imaginaries.
His alternative to this approach is to focus far less on quantification and much more on interconnectedness, that is, situating economics in a framework of relationships that are both societal and natural. While a modified planetary boundaries approach might be capable of incorporating ideas like interconnectedness, even where this applies it still gives dominance to those factors measured in scientific and quantitative terms, as if the model itself is completely neutral rather than constructed.

So, one of Pope Francis’s central ideas is integral ecology, by which he means due attention to the needs of the human person at all levels, including individual, familial, and societal; these needs should be understood in close relationship with both economic and environmental frameworks.24 For him it is not enough to encourage conformity to existing legal frameworks; rather, we need to promote best practices through adequate institutional and political change (§178). A legal system that responds simply to the short term economic demands of the market will be inadequate, and the “myopia of power politics delays the inclusion of a far-sighted environmental agenda within the overall agenda of governments” (§178).

Nonetheless, the force of law is not sufficient for the task, since the most important issue to address is change in human attitudes and will that are at the roots of human action. Pope Francis therefore advocates for ecological virtues, so that we find “a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions” (§211). By pressing simultaneously for change both at an inner moral level and at a structural, political level, he aims to face all aspects of the problem simultaneously. Inner change also includes openness to those of other religious traditions (§199; §222), including indigenous communities (§146). Drawing on the words of Pope John Paul II, he speaks boldly of the need for ecological conversion (§5; §216-221). Such conversion is grounded in the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, and takes its bearings from an understanding that both individuals and communities need to change in order to take into account the demands of ecological and environmental justice.

Pope Francis recognizes the interdependence between people and other creatures that resonates with the stress on kinship in the work of feminist social scientist and philosopher Donna Haraway.\(^{25}\) He does not cover the issue of what Haraway and others have termed the Plan- tationocene, that is, “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated and usually spatially transported labor,” \(^{26}\) but he does discuss exploitation of the earth and vulnerable more generally (§4; §27; §67; §106; §123; §230). There are important other differences. Pope Francis resists the kind of biocentrism that Haraway advocates. For him, the human person is still worth more than all the sparrows (§81, §119). Yet, his recognition of the intrinsic worth of all creatures and inter-connectivity is an important first step (§42). For those writing in the post-modern context he will still sound too anthropocentric. My judgment is that he could not have gone any further in his role as Prophet in the Anthropocene without losing many of those he intended to reach. An affiliation with the scientific and quasi-religious notion of Gaia is something that liberation theologian Boff was prepared to experiment with, \(^{27}\) but Pope Francis resists this move. Pope Francis is also not prepared to align with Haraway and claim that bacteria are the greatest transforming agents on planet earth, even if from a purely biological and ‘hard science’ perspective that might well be the case. Indeed, the inversion of hierarchical ordering through Gaia is something that relatively few commentators have been prepared to admit.\(^{28}\)

As with any prophet, Pope Francis brings out the old and the new. Traditional terminology in Catholic social teaching, such as the common good, is re-presented in order to take into account climate change and other environmental harms. Integral ecology builds on the concept of natural law and human ecology developed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.\(^{29}\) His sharp critiques of market economics and the dangers of capitalism push much harder than his predecessor, but it is not out of kilter with the direction of Pope Benedict XVI’s criticisms of the dangers


\(^{26}\) Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene”, footnote 5.


of the global market economy and his ideas on a renewed economy of
gratuitousness.\textsuperscript{30} Finally, his attention to interdependence among all
creatures shares aspects of Pope John Paul II’s nature mysticism, but is
now given much more flesh through a broader understanding of eco-
logical conversion that draws on Franciscan spirituality. He also follows
the praxis of liberation theology by taking up its process for change: first,
to pay attention to what we see; then to judge aright; and finally, to act.
That call to action is one that ecological activists the world over will
recognize and affirm as their own; but now it is driven not just by wonder
at the natural world, but also by a specific commission and invocation to
act on behalf of the created world. So, “Living our vocation to be pro-
tectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an
optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (§217).

\textbf{Pope Francis as Priest}

Pope Francis walks the walk in solidarity with those who suffer and the
poorest of the poor, that much is obvious to anyone. In so far as his call is
addressed to the world, he has set himself the task of being a minister not
just to the Catholic Church as its institutional leader, but also to the
whole world. But this is also expressed through his everyday actions. He
deprecated to live in the palatial accommodations provided for his office,
deliberately meets ordinary people on the street, washes the feet of
prisoners, welcomes those of other religious traditions, including
bringing back Muslim refugees to the Vatican, refuses to castigate those
of different sexual orientations, confers with women priests and other
leaders from different religious denominations, and so on ad infinitum.
He has also set himself the task of cleaning up corruption within the
Vatican, and in doing so is getting his own house in order.

All these changes have been disorientating for those who are used to
considering the Pope as a bastion of traditional European authority on
ecclesial matters. It is hardly surprising that the serious and sometimes
blunt message of \textit{Laudato si’} has been met with resistance by many
conservative Catholics, including those who advocate climate denial,
such as Australian Cardinal George Pell.\textsuperscript{31} Putting George Pell in charge
of the economic operations of the Vatican in 2014 was perhaps a shrewd
move on Pope Francis’s part: it has moved Pell away from potential

\textsuperscript{31} Rosie Scammell, “Cardinal George Pell Takes a Swing at Pope Francis’ Environmental
\texttt{church/2015/07/17/cardinal-george-pell-takes-a-swing-at-pope-francis-environmental-
encyclical/}. 
influence among the Australian populace. Pell’s idea that Pope Francis has no business meddling in either scientific or political matters crept into the conservative press. Such criticisms are false in light of the historical contribution of the Catholic Church to both scientific research and politics more broadly. In contrast with climate change deniers, including its more shrill advocates who have gained political power like President Donald Trump, Pope Francis is a man of the people, embracing the particular Argentinian variety of liberation theology that also emphasizes a theology of the people and for the people.32 He wants to look beyond climate denial and its predatory relationship with existential fears and loss of supremacy, and find the human roots of that tendency, roots related to insecurities in the face of challenges to the market economy, the habits of consumption, and the addiction to technologies that have dominated the Western, wealthier nations of the world.

Italian born Romano Guardini in his own portrayal of humanity’s loss of orientation in his The End of the Modern World, published over half a century ago, writes in a way that parallels to some extent Charles Taylor’s sharp societal critique and broad narrative of modernity’s rise and decline. Pope Francis’ analysis of the human roots of the ecological crisis is clearly inspired by Guardini. This includes Guardini’s criticisms of the thirst for power as being synonymous with progress, the ambiguous relationship of humanity with the natural world, and a sharp critique of the technological paradigm that he believes are bound up with inappropriate uses of power, power that threatens to destroy humanity as such. For example, Guardini claims that “The man engaged today in the labor of ‘technics’ knows full well that technology moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the race. He knows in the most radical sense of the term that power is its motive—a lordship of all; that man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature.”33 It is this unbridled use of technologies that Pope Francis wants to resist most strongly, along with the cultural allure of technologies that threaten to undercut face-to-face human relationships. It is not so much that new technologies are sinful, but when their use undercuts human dignity and relationships they have the potential to become idols. The proposed geoengineering technological “fixes” to the deep problems of humanity’s relationship with the earth proposed by

some Anthropocene advocates reflects a mentality that speaks of technological “solutions” to problems that are actually far broader than this.

As a priest and liberation theologian, Pope Francis quite deliberately desires to place himself in the shoes of the poorest of the poor, so as to see things from their perspective. No wonder that another liberation theologian and great advocate for ecology, Leonardo Boff, has written so warmly about Pope Francis’s ministry. Yet Pope Francis’s scope in Laudato si’ is not limited to those that are materially poor, but is global: he wants to address “every person living on this planet” (§2). In particular, through quoting the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew, Pope Francis acknowledges that the way human beings have treated the natural world is not something that can simply be brushed aside, but amounts to a grave sin (§8). The language of sin and repentance is an important way to recognize the severity of the breakdown in human relationships with others, including others living in our creaturely home. For Pope Francis, and religious believers more generally, this breakdown reflects a broken relationship with God, and he expresses shock at the complacent attitude shown towards degradation in the natural environment: “Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions” (§14). Such indifference shown towards the serious plight of environmental refugees (§25) is only going to get worse over time as environmental problems start to escalate. The prospect of an over-confidence in technical solutions is one that has been aired by eco-modernists, and amounts to quite the opposite of Pope Francis’s approach.

Pope Francis addresses his message not only to Christian believers, but also to those outside the Church. The catalogue of environmental disasters, their contribution to creaturely suffering and extinction, and the prospect of a collapse of the planet as a system raise the same questions of theodicy as the horrors of war, and tests even the most ardent religious faith. The cry in this case is not simply hopelessness, but also a cry of intense anger against God – the God of Love, Goodness, and Justice. Pope Francis refuses to allow God to be blamed in this way, and sees the Church’s role as protecting humanity from self-destruction (§79). God’s power is self-limited, so that “many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the

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34 Leonardo Boff, Francis of Rome and Francis of Assisi (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014).
Creator” (§80). In his view God is not removed from suffering, but is intimately present with creatures, while also not flouting their autonomy. He has faith, therefore, that “something new can always emerge” (§80). Further, he believes that faith in God and the power of the Holy Spirit will enable humanity to overcome the web of evils into which it is caught up. Pope Francis offers these encouraging words to prevent religious believers from sinking into despair when presented with so many complex challenges. True progress is therefore not separated from progress within, that is, progress in growth in ecological virtues and ecological education. Yes, we need to address the immense social and structural challenges facing the global human community, but we also need to let love for each other and for the natural world flower in the human heart. We are, as Pope Francis reminds us, “made for love” (§58), “Everything is connected. 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” (§91).

As priest, Pope Francis also understands the ultimate future of the earth and indeed the universe as a whole through the lens of Christian faith in Christ: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things” (§83). This transcendent dimension not only demonstrates his own faith in the ultimate future, but also provides his listeners with a reprieve from the scientific narratives of loss and destruction, including the language of risk associated with the newest scientific narratives on the Anthropocene and the breaching of planetary boundaries. It is a response, too, to the quasi-religious ramifications of the Anthropocene that undercut a religious perception of humanity’s relationship to the natural world as both one of unity and difference. Although in the past the threat of pantheism seemed to loom large and was one reason why religious leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI, have been a little wary of environmental movements, the Anthropocene narratives represents the opposite danger of not taking sufficient cognizance of the specific otherness of the natural world as God’s loving gift. Pope Francis’ vision is not, however, escapist, since such hope is grounded in very practical day-to-day tasks at local, societal, national and international levels that he encourages us all to work out in patience and hope. Unlike the ethic of power implies by different narratives of the Anthropocene leading to either a sense of paralysis or human hubris, *Laudato si’* offers an alternative biosocial imaginary. It is, therefore, an ethic of the common good fired by love for the other that is grounded in a particular ethos that is pertinent for our contemporary age. If that age is also to be perceived as the *Age of Humans*, then it should be grounded on a model of progress that leaves no one (and no creature entangled with us) behind.