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## **Caretakers of the Earth: Pope Francis and the Gospel of Creation**

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### **Abstract**

In the field of environmental ethics, the debate between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism continues apace. Many critics see anthropocentrism as a major factor in condoning, if not outright promoting environmental degradation while critics of nonanthropocentrism see it as exaggerating the value of the natural environment to the detriment of humanity's special value. In this paper, I seek to explore the various ways in which Christian insights can contribute to this debate, honing on the thoughts of Pope Francis, especially as they have been expressed in his encyclical entitled *Laudato Si'*. I begin by exploring the main goals of Francis in line with addressing the environmental crisis and what he sees as its major roots. An interesting idea this encyclical is the notion of the gospel of creation. I argue that the gospel of creation can be developed to transcend the debate between secular forms of anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism such that it retains the wisdom pertinent in both camps without their perceived shortcomings. By way of conclusion, I laid out the two unique aspects of the gospel of creation and how they provide good reasons to prefer Christian environmentalism over its secular counterparts.

**Keywords:** *Laudato Si*, Gospel of Creation, Anthropocentrism, Nonanthropocentrism, Christian environmentalism

The environmental crisis is a multifaceted problem. From environmental degradation to various forms of pollution to loss of species diversity to ozone depletion, there are various distinct problems to which the so-called environmental crisis may refer. In order to provide an effective response to this crisis, a narrow focus into one of these manifestations of the problem is required but a general picture of the whole set of environmental efforts is also needed. Nevertheless, the many faces of the crisis elicit an urgency that requires humanity's sustained attention and conservation efforts to effectively address.

On a more theoretical level, there is an ongoing debate in environmental ethics between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism. This is a significant matter for philosophers to discuss since one of the views pointed out as a major contributor to the environmental crisis is anthropocentrism, roughly the view that when it comes to environmental issues, human interests must take center stage. Anthropocentrism has often been deemed by many philosophers such as Aldo Leopold, J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston, III as an unfavorable view in environmental ethics, forcing its major defenders to advance a certain form of it that conserves the centrality of human in anthropocentrism while qualifying it such that it avoids the common charges thrown against it. Contemporary defenders of anthropocentrism include John Passmore,<sup>1</sup> Bryan Norton,<sup>2</sup> and William Grey.<sup>3</sup> There is currently a call to distinguish contemporary defense of anthropocentrism from what has been dubbed as old anthropocentrism whose classical proponents include Descartes, Locke and Kant.<sup>4</sup> According to Teea Kortetmäki, the main motivation for old

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<sup>1</sup> John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Bryan G. Norton, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> William Grey, "Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism," *Ethics and the Environment* Vol. 3, no. 1 (1998): 97–103; William Grey, "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 71, no. 4 (1993): 463–75.

<sup>4</sup> Teea Kortetmäki, "Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism Revisited: Theoretical Confusions and Practical Conclusions," *SATS* Vol. 14, no. 1 (2013): 23.

anthropocentrism is “justifying the free exploitation of nature with philosophical (more or less questionable) arguments” whereas “the new anthropocentrism is genuinely concerned about the environmental issues themselves, expressing discontent with the current situation of human exploitation of nature.”<sup>5</sup> Other scholars with regard the relationship of religion with ecology are even more scathing towards old anthropocentrism, especially as it has been defended by classical theologians such as Aquinas. For instance, Jame Schaefer described an “anthropocentric bias...as noncontributory or harmful to theological discourse in our age of ecological degradation.”<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to anthropocentrism, there is nonanthropocentrism which is a cluster of different views. In any case, what unites nonanthropocentrists is their explicit opposition to anthropocentrism, whether of the old or the new varieties. Philosophers such as Kenneth E. Goodpaster and J. Baird Callicott see it as a mistake to consider human beings as the only one that should be morally considered and arguing instead that other things by possessing intrinsic value also deserve such considerability.<sup>7</sup> What is thus morally considerable depends on what group of nonanthropocentrists is in question. Biocentrism is the view that life itself is the non-arbitrary criterion for something to have moral considerability while ecocentrism takes species or ecosystems to have intrinsic value. To this day, the debate between anthropocentrists and their opponents continues to rage on.

In this paper, I seek to explore the various ways in which Christian insights can contribute to this debate, honing on the thoughts of Pope Francis, especially as they have been expressed in his encyclical entitled *Laudato Si'*. The

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<sup>5</sup> Kortetmäki, “Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism...”, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth E. Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 75, no. 6 (1978), 322-325; J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

intellectual schism between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism is a longstanding one in the area of environmental ethics. However, almost every philosopher from both sides, however discordant their views are, begin with secular assumptions, that is, ones that do not assume theistic, much more Christian, principles. By treating *Laudato Si'* as a work in environmental ethics, we can see how a Christian worldview can enliven the ongoing debate by exploring how it may provide a unique, perhaps even superior, position within the debate. This is of course not to imply that there is no Christian or even theistic environmental ethics before *Laudato Si'*.<sup>8</sup> It is simply to acknowledge that the direction to which Francis' encyclical leads, especially when put in the context of the debate between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism, is something that is unique from its predecessors and worthy of deeper development. In a general sense, this means that Christianity as a worldview with a set of assumptions and principles continues to provide a unique voice to the concerns and problems in philosophy.

Francis' encyclical is revolutionary in that it is a definite break away from the unapologetic anthropocentrism that characterizes Church teaching before it. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes*, an encyclical by Pope Paul VI states that 'man . . . is the only creature God willed for its own sake' (GS 24.3) but as we'll be shown shortly, Francis in *Laudato Si'* has argued for the acknowledgement of intrinsic value to nonhuman creatures. As theologian Carmody T. S. Grey has noted, *Laudato Si'* "stresses the value of nonhuman creation not just in relation to 'man's use', but in itself."<sup>9</sup> In line with that, I argue that Francis' notion of the gospel of creation can be argued as a happy middle ground between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism.

A major weakness lodged against anthropocentrism is that its preoccupation with solely human interests is deemed to be what led to the

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<sup>8</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>9</sup> Carmody T. S. Grey, "'The Only Creature God Willed for Its Own Sake': Anthropocentrism in *Laudato Si'* and *Gaudium et Spes*," *Modern Theology* Vol. 36, no. 4 (November 2019): 8.

crisis in the first place while nonanthropocentrists are often accused of identifying intrinsic value in nature totally apart from human interests when such identification is impossible. According to anthropocentrists, no value in nature is possible without an ineluctably human lens that makes the valuation. This is what Frederick Ferre terms as “perspectival anthropocentrism”.<sup>10</sup>

The main advantage of what Francis calls “the gospel of creation” is that it can be developed to transcend the debate such that it retains the wisdom pertinent in both camps without their perceived shortcomings. And given that Francis is working under the precipice of a longstanding Christian tradition, the strengths of the gospel of creation are essentially predicated on a Christian as opposed to a secular framework. Thus, if the gospel of creation successfully provides a reasonable middle ground between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism then this provides a reason to prefer Christian environmentalism over secular ones.

### **The Current State of the Debate**

The main player in this debate is anthropocentrism and so it is only necessary to start with a clear definition of it. How has it been commonly understood within the ongoing discussion? Many define it simply as “the belief that value is human-centered and that all other beings are means to human ends.”<sup>11</sup> Part of this definition is the idea that human beings are the only creatures deemed as intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable for their own sake, while all the other nonhuman creations are valued only instrumentally, that is, valued for advancing human interest. While this may sound like an exaggerated view of human importance, anthropocentrists are explicit in affirming it. As

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<sup>10</sup> Frederick Ferré, “Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?” in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, eds. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Kopnina et al., “Anthropocentrism: More Than Just a Misunderstood Problem,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* Vol. 31 (2018): 109.

John Passmore said, “I treat human ‘interests’ as paramount. I do not apologise for that fact.”<sup>12</sup> In his summary of the debate between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, Kortetmäki remarks that “human interest prioritization or nonhuman interest dismissal is constitutive to new anthropocentrism.”<sup>13</sup>

This human-centeredness led critics of anthropocentrism to accuse it in various ways. For instance, Eccy de Jonge sees it as a threat not only to the non-human world but also to the human world.<sup>14</sup> Kopnina et al. describes it unflinchingly as “egotistical and solipsistic, obsessed only with humans.”<sup>15</sup> As if that’s not enough, they further claim that “anthropocentrism is clearly a significant driver of ecocide.”<sup>16</sup> Given that last sentence, it seems that if one continues to defend anthropocentrism, one is guilty of some sort of murder. Why would critics of anthropocentrism give such harsh descriptions? This is because they see it as the main driver that caused the environmental crisis. Since Lynn White’s condemnation of anthropocentrism and also of Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”<sup>17</sup>, critics perceive that if humanity continues to be viewed as the only one that has intrinsic value, environmental degradation will not cease. As deep ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions said, “Humans will continue to dominate Nature because humans are above, superior to or outside the rest of Nature.”<sup>18</sup> A change of thinking about what has value is deemed to be required.

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<sup>12</sup> Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> Kortetmäki, “Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism Revisited...”, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Eccy De Jonge, *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Kopnina et al., “Anthropocentrism: More Than Just a Misunderstood Problem,” 123.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* Vol. 155 (1967): 1205.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 43.

In response, critics of nonanthropocentrism see this expansion of view about what has intrinsic value to carry morally abhorrent results. If ecosystems and other species must be conserved in much the same way that human beings are protected, this can lead to exterminating excess people in order to conserve a unique ecosystem. Such implications led some to call nonanthropocentric views such as biocentrism and ecocentrism to be ecofascism.<sup>19</sup> Tom Regan, the philosopher behind the idea of animal rights, calls ecocentrism as advanced by Aldo Leopold<sup>20</sup> to be environmental fascism since it subordinates human interests to the concerns of the ecosystem.<sup>21</sup> Again, these are scathing characterizations and call for an adequate explanation. Although, as Regan intimated, the strong language seems called for: if one sees the value of a human being as of lower level to that of an endangered species or of a uniquely diverse ecosystem, then this seems a veiled form of misanthropy that has no place in any intellectual discussion.

Clearly, both sides see the practical gravity of what is at stake in the debate. It is only right to address whatever contributes to the environmental crisis but it also seems sensible to recognize the appropriate value of human beings, especially when compared with nonhuman creatures or even ecosystems. What is at stake here is the recognition of intrinsic value: is it only human beings that possess intrinsic value as anthropocentrists claim or does intrinsic value apply to other living things as well or even ecosystems? The role that intrinsic value has to moral theory has made philosophers all worked up with some even calling it “the most important and contested notion in ethical theory.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Ferré, “Persons in Nature: Towards an Applicable and Unified Environmental Ethics,” in *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. D. R. Keller (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 155–56.

<sup>20</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>21</sup> Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 362.

<sup>22</sup> Dale Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 68.

As mentioned before, intrinsic value is commonly understood to mean possessing of value in itself as opposed to being valued only instrumentally; but as philosopher Dale Jamieson has pointed out, there are several ways by which one can understand intrinsic value. It may mean one of four things: “(1) intrinsic value as ultimate value; (2) intrinsic value as moral considerability; (3) intrinsic value as inherent value; and (4) intrinsic value as independence from valuers.”<sup>23</sup> The common understanding simply refers to the third meaning. For now, we need not delve into the details of these distinctions unless further discussion will require it.

### ***Laudato Si'* and Environmental Ethics**

In this section, I shall try to lay out the main goals of Francis in line with addressing the environmental crisis and what he sees as its major roots.<sup>24</sup> Francis is clear as to what his aims are with regard the encyclical. As he said, he will “consider some principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent. I will then attempt to get to the roots of the present situation, to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes.”<sup>25</sup> Francis is clear that he is starting from the viewpoint of “our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (LS, 15).

While Francis recognizes that at the center of God’s creation is the human being, he is also acutely aware how the environmental problems we are

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<sup>23</sup> Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment*, 154.

<sup>24</sup> While *Laudato Si'* bears the name of Pope Francis as its author, it bears mentioning that I do not assume that its ideas are solely that of Pope Francis since official church documents like encyclicals are a concerted effort of the Pope and other intellectuals within the Church. Still, I still use Pope Francis as the bearer of its authorship, hoping that the reader would bear that caveat in mind.

<sup>25</sup> *Laudato Si'* (henceforth LS), 15. URL: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). Last Accessed: August 31, 2021.



currently facing are also due to the actions of humanity. Early in the document, Francis mentions the so-called rapidification of society, which refers to “more intensified pace of life and work” (LS, 18). He further laments the state of the earth that “is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS, 21). The cause of such a state of affairs is what Francis calls “the throwaway culture”, which is “the practice of quickly reducing things to rubbish” (LS, 22). Unlike the work of natural ecosystems, which utilizes a cyclical nature of production where a certain natural waste becomes food and nutrients for another, Francis describes “our industrial system, at the end of its cycle of production and consumption, has not developed the capacity to absorb and reuse waste and by-products” (LS, 22). Thus, when rapidification of everything is coupled with a throwaway culture, the result is clearly the ever-increasing deterioration of the earth, our home.

Francis understands that “things do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time” (LS, 59) but this complacency is exacerbated by the view that “ecological problems will solve themselves simply with the application of new technology and without any need for ethical considerations or deep change” (LS, 60). But as Francis rightly pointed out, however immense technological development becomes, it is helpless without a development in human responsibility, values and conscience (LS, 105). In fact, over-reliance on technology has a deeper downside since “technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups” (LS, 107). In many parts of the encyclical, Francis wants to turn close attention to our relationship with science and technology since “many problems of today’s world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society” (LS, 107). For many people, technology is a good thing but without a mindful relationship with it, it forces us to mindless consumption whose environmental consequence is that of continuous degradation. The

technological mind sees nature merely as a technical given, without much regard for the intrinsic dignity of the world. In contrast, Francis calls for “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” (LS, 111). A suggestion from Leonardo Estioko is the paradigm of sustainable development, understood to mean “the monumental task of reorienting all levels and forms of economy and development so that these take into account the need to keep ecosystems health [sic].”<sup>26</sup> This idea did not escape Francis, calling for “sustainable and integral development”(LS, 13) and “integral and sustainable human development” (LS, 18) among others though he clarifies that “We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity” (LS, 159). This means that we need to bear in mind the world we are leaving behind for the next generation. We need to remember that this world is given as a gift to us by God and that we need to bountifully share it with others. As Rhoderick John Abellanosa pointed out, *Laudato Si’* is an encyclical that calls each of us to pursue and protect our common good. It is, as he said, “a call for all of us to think of our common future – to go back to a fundamental principle of the Church’s social teaching where each and every person has a responsibility to his or her own kind.”<sup>27</sup>

Apparently, much of the environmental crisis is exacerbated by human interventions that are narrow-minded and view nature as merely a vessel to be fully exhausted. Francis does not deny the human roots of the environmental crisis (LS, 14). Based on this, one may get the impression that Francis sees the presence of human beings on the planet as the ultimate problem, given careless human interventions that jeopardize the once pristine state of the earth. However, for Francis, this is just another extreme (LS, 60). In fact, he upholds the stewardship model that has always been the position of the

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<sup>26</sup> Leonardo R. Estioko, “Philosophy, Evolution, and Ecology,” *PHAVISMINDA Journal* Vol. 12 (May 2013): 9.

<sup>27</sup> Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, “Reading *Laudato Si’* in the Light of the Common Good,” *PHAVISMINDA Journal* Vol. 15 (May 2016): 52.

Church when it comes to relationship of humans with the rest of creation. Francis clarifies that what the Bible means with God's command to us "to have dominion over the earth" (Gen. 1:28) is not one of absolute dominion but one of responsible stewardship (LS, 116). With this cleared up, we can now turn to Francis's position with regards the anthropocentrism-nonanthropocentrism debate.

What is immediately clear is that Francis explicitly denies any association with what he takes to be the wrong forms of anthropocentrism. Basing on the Bible, Francis renounces tyrannical anthropocentrism, the view that creatures other than human beings are not a matter of concern (LS, 68). In a similar vein, Francis condemns a distorted anthropocentrism, which is in contrast with the view that "Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness" (LS, 69). But nowhere did Francis abjure anthropocentrism as such. As Carmody T. S. Grey pointed out, "There is in this [in *Laudato Si'*] an implicit acknowledgement that anthropocentrism is not *per se* a negative term."<sup>28</sup>

With regards the created order, the passages above suggest that it possesses a value that is independent of its being valued by human beings. Moreover, the value of the created order is there even in the absence of humans by virtue of it having been created by God and thereby becomes a reflection of what Francis calls as "a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness" (LS, 69). Interestingly, this claim is directly in tension even with new anthropocentrists like Bryan G. Norton who view humans as the only loci of fundamental value, arguing that what is good for human beings is also good for nature in the long run.<sup>29</sup> This same tension is present with other new anthropocentrists like John Passmore who states that "an 'ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the plants and animals growing on it'... would

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<sup>28</sup> Grey, "'The Only Creature God Willed for Its Own Sake,'" 874.

<sup>29</sup> Norton, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists*, 240.

have to be justified by reference to human interests.”<sup>30</sup> What this suggests is that nature left on its own devices possesses no inherent value other than how it would further human interests.

This understanding of anthropocentrism is vulnerable to an objection made by Katie McShane. Her point of departure is our valuing attitudes towards the natural world. But as she said, “[S]ome attitudes that we can take toward a thing are incompatible with thinking that its value is entirely dependent on its satisfaction of our interests.”<sup>31</sup> Take for instance love in friendship. If I say that I value my friendship with Tod to the extent that he extends my interests, and that I would lose interest in our friendship to the extent that he fails to fulfill that function, then you would likely doubt whether I am genuinely Tod’s friend. As McShane explained, “The love involved in friendship is an *other-centred* emotion. To love something this way is in part to see it as having value that goes beyond what it can do for you.”<sup>32</sup> Aside from love, McShane also mentioned respect and awe as valuing attitudes that have similar dynamics. And the crucial part of McShane’s argument is in trying to prove that we, or at least a great number of people, have such valuing attitudes towards the natural world. McShane gave the examples of people’s love for their pets or the environmentalists’ love of the land, understood not simply as love for mere soil, “but rather the affection one feels toward a particular place – toward the nonhuman parts of the community to which one belongs.”<sup>33</sup> One may further cite the love of some indigenous peoples for particular mountains and rivers as a concrete example of such attitude. This sentiment is echoed by Francis, stating that for indigenous communities, “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and

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<sup>30</sup> Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, 187.

<sup>31</sup> Katie McShane, “Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care?” *Environmental Values* 16 (2007): 175.

<sup>32</sup> McShane, 175–76. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 177–78.

values" (LS, 146). But if such valuing attitudes do indeed exist, and a number of evidence seems to suggest that they do, then there is something fundamentally wrong with the view of anthropocentrism that the natural world cannot have any value aside from furthering human interests.

This concern however does not apply to Francis' position since there is a way for Christians to explain such valuing attitudes, and it is by recognizing that "the world is God's loving gift" (LS, 220). The ground of nature's value is not found solely in human interests but more so in God's perfect nature. Since God is perfectly good and perfectly beautiful, God's creation will inevitably reflect those properties. Thus, by protecting and conserving nature, and by using its various resources responsibly, we are thereby showing our respect and allegiance to our and nature's Creator. Note also that this approach easily grounds the intrinsic value of the natural world, understood here to mean moral considerability.

### **The Moral Considerability of Nature**

Grounding the moral considerability of nature is one of the toughest challenges that nonanthropocentrists have to face, especially in the absence of a transcendent ground like God. Two of the most common forms of nonanthropocentrism are biocentrism and ecocentrism. While zoocentrism—the view that moral consideration should be extended to animals by virtue of the fact that they can suffer—is also nonanthropocentric, it is widely criticized by biocentrists and ecocentrists alike for privileging animals in the moral community in much the same way that anthropocentrists privilege humans in terms of moral consideration.<sup>34</sup> Biocentrists take the possession of life as itself worthy of moral significance, such as when Kenneth Goodpaster stated that

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<sup>34</sup> For the classic defense of zoocentrism, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random House, 1977). For a criticism of zoocentrism, see Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable" *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 75, no. 6 (1978), 310-325.

when looking for moral considerability, “nothing short of *being alive* seems to me to be a plausible and nonarbitrary criterion.”<sup>35</sup> However, the idea behind biocentrism forces the question of what is there in life that gives it such moral value (not aesthetic nor prudential one). In fact, Francis explicitly rejects biocentrism, stating that it “would entail adding yet another imbalance, failing to solve present problems and adding new ones” (LS, 118). For Francis, we need to recognize the uniqueness—their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility—bestowed by God on human beings in order to expect humanity to feel responsibility to the world, a recognition that is precluded by biocentrism. Some biocentrists such as James Sterba view every living entity as possessing of intrinsic value but according to him in situations where the basic needs of humans are in conflict with other living beings, then human interests should override all the other ones.<sup>36</sup> This position however seems to illustrate the inevitability of recognizing the primacy of human interests within the created order, a position which boils down to how anthropocentrism is envisioned to be.

Ecocentrism is beset with a similar problem, i.e., that of explaining the ground of ecosystems’ moral considerability by appealing solely on their intrinsic properties without invoking human interests or God. And even if some properties are advanced to show that ecosystems can have intrinsic value, it is not clear how can that ever trump the interests, much more the vital needs of human beings. Consider this thought-experiment: suppose that a long-unknown small ecosystem is found, and it is filled with sophisticated and intricate forms of organisms. Suppose further that, without physically going to the area, scientists via highly advanced technological tools discovered a certain species there which is vital to the life of the ecosystem but could kill humanity in a few weeks if they come in contact with humans. Now, the best way to make sure that such interaction does not happen is to destroy the ecosystem

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<sup>35</sup> Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable”, 310.

<sup>36</sup> James P. Sterba, “Kantians and Utilitarians and the Moral Status of Nonhuman Life,” in *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 184–88.

permanently. The question then becomes: is it right to destroy the ecosystem or should we just let it exist while hoping that no humans would come in contact with it? I suspect that both anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists alike would choose to destroy the ecosystem, and the explanation is obvious and clear: human interests especially when it pertains to the preservation of the whole human life are more valuable than other interests there may be in the created order.

Notice however that a similar challenge can be thrown against Francis' idea of the gospel of creation: if Francis views everything as interconnected (LS: 70, 92, 138), then what kind of relationship should humans have with creatures that are detrimental to the flourishing and even existence of human beings, things such as bad bacteria, deadly microorganisms and human parasites? Since Francis states that "[e]ach organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself" (LS, 140), then what does this entail about whether bad bacteria and human parasites have intrinsic value? While Francis has a short answer to this version of the problem of evil, (LS, 80) what is more of interest for us is what can be discerned in Francis' *Laudato Si'* that would point to the right treatment of nonhuman creatures, even of deadly ones like human parasites. The key point here lies with what Francis thinks our general treatment of plants and animals should be. As he states, "While human intervention on plants and animals is permissible when it pertains to the necessities of human life, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only "if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives"" (LS, 130). Francis sees the use of animals as morally permissible when it is done for right reasons, such as when doing so expresses caring for humans or saving human lives. Thus, the passage above gives us a plausible answer to the challenge above: if certain creatures are such that they pose an existential threat to humanity or when their possible interaction with humans severely threatens human flourishing, it would be morally permissible to kill them. Also, when Francis expresses disappointment with the loss of species, he is pointing

out how these species “constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing diseases and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead of meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems” (LS, 32). Moreover, Francis bemoans the fact “more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure” (LS, 90). So Francis is clear that he does not espouse zoocentrism, especially the versions espoused by Peter Singer and Tom Regan which lead to veganism.

However, the fact that Francis does not espouse either zoocentrism or ecocentrism is in great tension with Francis’ idea of everything being interconnected in nature, and every creature being made to honor God. In fact, after mentioning the various positive uses of other species to humanity, Francis states that “it is not enough... to think of different species merely as potential ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves” (LS, 33). There appears to be a dilemma with what Francis implies by respecting nature along with nonhuman creatures in it. If respect here is meant to imply that we generally let nature run its course with minimal interference from humans, then it is not clear how creatures in nature including humans are supposed to be interconnected with one another. Isn’t it the fact that we can let nature be while we do our human affairs entail that the interconnection that Francis constantly talks about is only skin deep? But of course, the interconnected of nature is unavoidable. On the other hand, if respect here does not preclude killing or using nonhuman creatures, especially for reasons mentioned above, then it is not clear what respecting creatures entails in practice if human beings can kill or use them for good reasons. The main challenge here seems to be identifying in detail what kind and how much utilization of nature’s resources would constitute its rightful use on the one hand and abuse on the other, a concern which has not escaped other eco-theologians such as Grey.<sup>37</sup> There are some passages that suggest what Francis’ envisions by nature’s abuse such as when human beings “see no other meaning

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<sup>37</sup> Grey, “‘The Only Creature God Willed for Its Own Sake,’” 882.



in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption” (LS, 5). He also pointed out that “nature...viewed solely as a source of profit and gain has serious consequences for society” (LS, 82). So it seems that it is capitalism and consumerism *merely* for the sake of profit and consumption are some of the main culprits here. This is what Abellanosa speaks of when he states that *Laudato Si'* warned about the “excesses of capitalism”<sup>38</sup> and what Abellanosa calls ‘conscienceless capitalism.’<sup>39</sup> For our purposes, a look at this problem of the rightful use of nature provides a glimpse on where to locate Francis’ position is in the anthropocentrism-nonanthropocentrism debate.

On the one hand, Francis breaks away from anthropocentrism by placing the center of value from humans to God so that everything in creation only serves to reflect God’s value. Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Francis wants to emphasize the detrimental effects on nature of a myopic view of humanity “where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone” (LS, 6). Francis is well aware of anthropocentric roots of human action that lead to environmental degradation. By pointing to God as the source of all values, the view of Francis becomes theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Let us call this the *theocentric component* of Francis’ gospel of creation. In this regard, the hierarchy of values as Francis conceives it is metaphysically divided into two: on the one hand is God and on the other is the whole created order. But it should be borne in mind that this division does not imply that the value of God and of the whole created order is asymmetrical; rather, the value of the whole created order is fully grounded in God in that God’s creation is a reflection of God’s perfect goodness and beauty. Thus, to disrespect nature is to disrespect God who is nature’s rightful owner. By consequence, this new theology of the natural world entails that nonhuman creatures have intrinsic value in two senses, that is, they are valuable apart from human valuers, and they are also morally considerable for

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<sup>38</sup> Abellanosa, “Reading *Laudato Si'* in the Light of the Common Good,” 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

the fact that they are created by God. It is therefore correct to view Francis' approach to ecology as different from anthropocentrism, whether of the old or the new version, which takes humanity as the center of value, with everything else deriving value solely from the interest of human beings.

But within the created order, Francis is also clear that the value of humanity is primary, distancing himself from various nonanthropocentric views. Let us call this the *humanistic component* of Francis' gospel of creation. When the existence or the well-being of human beings is at stake and the price to pay is the use of nature, then we should choose to use nature *for the sake of* human beings. Francis does not see the value of humanity as on par with the value of the rest of nature. As he said, "Christian thought sees human beings as possessing a particular dignity above other creatures; it thus inculcates esteem for each person and respect for others" (LS, 119). In fact, he speaks against the anti-life tendencies of some ecological movements. As he states, "it is troubling that, when some ecological movements defend the integrity of the environment, rightly demanding that certain limits be imposed on scientific research, they sometimes fail to apply those same principles to human life" (LS, 136). It is a mistake to see the conservation of environment as a valid substitute for the preservation of human life. Francis wants to make us realize that "our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God" (LS, 119). So, our concern for nature must be coupled with sensitivity to the plight of our fellow human beings so that we don't end up neglecting one for the sake of the other.

### **The Gospel of Creation and Secular Environmentalism**

The theocentric component of Francis' gospel of creation affords certain advantages over secular forms of environmentalism. For one, God as the ultimate metaphysical value in reality from which all values emanate provides a plausible ground of nature's intrinsic value. Since God values His creation and

its goodness, humanity must not treat the whole created order with the sole purpose of being used for whatever sake they find desirable, however destructive to ecosystems it is or negligent of its long-term negative effects to human well-being. Even nonanthropocentrists such as J. Baird Callicott recognizes the advantages of this theocentric component to providing intrinsic value to nature. As he said, “the Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic provides for the intrinsic value of non-human natural entities and nature as a whole simply and directly. Either by the act of creation or by a secondary fiat – surveying the result...and declaring it to be ‘good’ – God conferred intrinsic value on the world and all its creatures.”<sup>40</sup>

But this move does not seem to be easily available to secular environmentalists, especially the nonanthropocentrists. One option for them is to posit the existence of something which can ground nature’s intrinsic value absent a transcendent order of reality that is available to Christian theism. Another option is to ground such intrinsic value on nature’s inherent properties but such properties need to be morally salient in some ways. Pantheism provides one way out. By positing Godlike properties to nature, pantheists can easily ground nature’s moral considerability. But it is another question whether pantheism is even remotely plausible. The God of Christian theism can ground nature’s intrinsic value because He is by nature perfect and infinitely good, and nature is a product of God’s providential act. But if God and nature are thought as one (which is what pantheism is), then the imperfections of nature need to be explained. What does it mean for nature to be perfect on the one hand while marked by various imperfections on the other? Pantheists can try their way out of this inconsistency by qualifying the Godlike properties of nature as less bound up with the attributes of the God of Christian theism and more attuned with the properties of the natural world. But this move makes it harder for them to ground nature’s intrinsic value since the properties of the God of Christian theism now transferred to nature are now less and less theistic that

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<sup>40</sup> J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 192.

the grounding work they are supposed to fulfill is doomed to fail at the start. Another option would be panentheism<sup>41</sup>, the view affirming “that although God and the world are ontologically distinct and God transcends the world, the world is ‘in’ God ontologically.”<sup>42</sup> One of the major and persistent problems for panentheism is the problem of vagueness. Panentheism emerged as a middle way between theism and pantheism, but this comes at the price of clarity. If God and the world are ontologically distinct, what does it mean to say that the world is *in* God? If panentheists choose to emphasize the ontological distinctness between God and the world, panentheism reduces to theism while if they choose to emphasize that the world is not utterly distinct from God, it reverts to pantheism. Even defenders of panentheism like Raphael Lacaster concede that the search for a definitive panentheistic concept “might remain forever unfulfilled.”<sup>43</sup> For our purposes, the main problem with this approach is that since God here is viewed to be ontologically distinct from the world, secular environmentalists who adopt this view will cease to be secular. All these options notwithstanding, even if secular nonanthropocentrists manage to justify the positing of intrinsic value to nature, it would require a separate step whether this value is on the same level as that of humans.

With regards the humanistic component, many might see it as *Laudato Si*’s greatest drawback, if only for its close association with anthropocentrism and its attendant problems. What nonanthropocentrists see as the problem with putting the human species at the center of nature is how this kind of thinking leads to environmental exploitation and destruction. But the empirical evidence seems to suggest otherwise. In a recent study by Kaida and Kaida, it is “confirmed that both ecocentric and anthropocentric values facilitated pro-

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<sup>41</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this.

<sup>42</sup> John W. Cooper, *Panentheism The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 18.

<sup>43</sup> Raphael Lacaster, “The Attractiveness of Panentheism—a Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke” *Sophia* Vol. 53 (2014): 390.

environmental behavior.”<sup>44</sup> Given that, it would be careless to link the humanistic aspects of *Laudato Si'* with environmentally insensitive behaviors.

With that common worry now dispelled, we can now turn our attention in how putting humanity in the center of the created order is superior in a number of ways. For one, it avoids the thorny dilemmas that plague nonanthropocentric views such as biocentrism and ecocentrism, such as when there is a conflict in choosing between the existence of a nonhuman life and the life of a human being. Christian environmentalism especially as expressed in Francis' *Laudato Si'* would have no such problem. Whenever such conflicts of interest occur, there is no question that the interest of human beings ought to always take precedence. Francis constantly talks about the unique dignity bestowed by God on human beings (LS: 43, 65, 69). Needless to say, humanity being created in the image and likeness of God as narrated in the Bible (Gen. 1:26) is a central foundation to the humanistic aspect of Francis's theology of creation as much as it is to the rest of Christianity. Any environmental position that denigrates the position of human beings within nature requires a sustained justification that illustrates certain properties in nonhuman nature as superior with those uniquely endowed to human beings. If one attempts to meet the challenge by appealing to the evolutionary process in which the human species is only one product among countless others, then one may in fact infer that there is no reason to think (apart from Christian considerations) that humanity is in any way special.

But another challenge has to be met. Many nonanthropocentrists, such as Holmes Rolston III, Aldo Leopold, and J. Baird Callicott, reject the humanistic picture of human beings as discontinuous from nature by virtue of reason but they seem to maintain the picture of humanity having moral transcendence over it. The recognition of moral transcendence is crucial since it is what

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<sup>44</sup> Naoko Kaida and Kosuke Kaida, "Facilitating Pro-Environmental Behavior: The Role of Pessimism and Anthropocentric Environmental Values," *Social Indicators Research* Vol. 126 (2016): 1243.

“makes us uniquely able, and therefore uniquely obliged, to detach ourselves from any natural determination of our behavior”, as Bernard Williams described it.<sup>45</sup> But a recognition of moral transcendence preserves “the traditional doctrine of our transcendence of nature, and with it our monarchy of the earth.”<sup>46</sup> The special recognition of human beings as moral agents within nature is inescapable if we want to keep the meaning of human responsibility intact. Francis is clear in “our obligation to use the earth’s goods responsibly” (LS, 69). He continues further that the fact that “Judaeo-Christian thought demythologized nature... emphasizes all the more our human responsibility for nature” (LS, 78). In the Christian worldview, the ascription of unique moral responsibility to man is easily explained since God uniquely created man with intelligence and with the conscience to recognize right and wrong. But this recognition is in conflict with the view that humanity is not in any way separate or distinct from nature. As Redentor de la Rosa states, “to say that man should curb his technological enthusiasm or act in such a way that some of his desires, needs and goals are regulated is to say that man should act in a distinctively human way, that is, as a moral agent distinct from the rest of nature.”<sup>47</sup> Critics of the humanistic aspect cannot have it both ways: either they keep the view of humanity not being special in any way with the rest of nature but then, they have to explain how they can ascribe unique moral accountability to man. The other option would be to concede that humanity possesses the unique moral responsibility towards nature but this goes with the price of nonanthropocentric views becoming vacuous or empty. In any case, these challenges illustrate that both the theocentric and humanistic aspects of Francis’ gospel of creation afford it with philosophical advantages over secular forms of either anthropocentrism or nonanthropocentrism.

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<sup>45</sup> Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 237.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Redentor De La Rosa, “Anthropocentric Ecocentrism: Why Anthropocentrism Is Compatible with an Environmentally-Centered Ethics,” *PHAVISMINDA Journal* Vol. 13 (May 2014): 19.

## Conclusion

Christianity, especially as lived by its adherents in the Philippines, features the Christian commitment to liturgies and intellectual assent to explicitly Christian beliefs and dogmas. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such commitment, there may arise an impression, especially from the outside, that Christianity is lacking a voice that speaks directly and unequivocally about pertinent social issues that have vast practical implications. Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* breaks new paths not by speaking about a current social issue from a uniquely Christian lens (because that has long been done by many papal encyclicals in the past) but by showing that a Christian framework still has something unique to contribute to a longstanding debate in philosophy, specifically in environmental ethics, by questioning long-held assumptions even within the Christian paradigm, and forging new principles in place of them that remain true to their Christian roots.

In this paper, I tried to lay out Pope Francis' notion of the gospel of creation, especially in the ways by which it contributes to the debate between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism. I point out that the theocentric and humanistic aspects of the gospel of creation are fruits of Pope Francis' attempt to reconcile the strengths between the two opposing viewpoints. Since these aspects are grounded in theistic, and some even in distinctively Christian assumptions, these manifest that Christian environmentalism is one fruitful way by which to address the environmental crisis, especially to the extent that it can bypass the problems plaguing secular forms of environmentalism. Therefore, while *Laudato Si'* is a document that is practical in much of its approach, I hope to show that its philosophical insights are just as worthy of serious and sustained exploration.

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