



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Economic magical thinking and the divine ecology of love

**Citation for published version:**

Northcott, MS 2016, 'Economic magical thinking and the divine ecology of love', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 263-269. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3664378>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1215/22011919-3664378](https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3664378)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Environmental Humanities

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

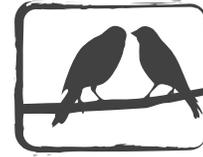
**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





COMMENTARY

## Economic Magical Thinking and the Divine Ecology of Love

MICHAEL S. NORTHCOTT

*School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Scotland*

In the encyclical *Laudato si'*,<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis identifies a number of causes for the ecological crisis and for the failure of the nations to reduce their impacts on the beauty, fertility, and climate stability of “our Sister Mother Earth” (§1). First, Francis notes those causes previously identified by Pope Benedict XVI. For Benedict, atheism is key to the modern world’s maltreatment of the earth: it underwrites the related failures to recognize that humanity did not create herself and that there is a transcendent order of value in the divine gift of creation that humans ought to respect and honor (§5, 6). Francis also concurs with Benedict when he notes the increased powers modern humans have acquired through science and technology “to transform reality” and the moral and spiritual failure to use these without harm to the planet (§5).

Francis then considers a number of causes specific to this encyclical. These include the creation, through industrial technologies and consumerism, of “a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish” (§22). Industrialism has turned the God-given vocation of humans as makers against the intrinsic laws of nature, including that nature does not waste and that all creatures in nature are connected (§42). Francis observes critically the tendency of the modern economy to turn nature’s goods into commodities, as in the privatization of water, which turns water “into a commodity subject to the laws of the market.” He criticizes the economic plunder of forests, which reduces biodiversity and destroys the dwelling places of their indigenous human inhabitants (§32). And he observes that “the land of the Southern poor” is exploited by developed countries in the North through “a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse” (§52). For Francis, the root cause

1. Francis, *Laudato si'* (hereafter cited by section number in the text).

of the ecological crisis is the turning of all created goods into resources and consumer goods for capitalist production systems and markets:

A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly. We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves. (§34)

On a more hopeful note, Francis acknowledges that there is a growing “ecological sensitivity” among citizens and that some countries have cleaned up polluted rivers and coastlines, restored woodlands, and encouraged renewable energy (§58). But this has not changed “harmful habits of consumption,” because “the markets stimulate ever greater demand” (§55) and because the global system gives priority to “speculation and the pursuit of financial gain” (§56). As a result, “whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule” (*ibid.*).

Francis returns to his indictment of the global economic system and consumerism later in the encyclical, noting “the absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future” (§189). And he is critical of approaches to environmental protection “solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits” and market forces, including the creation of a global market in carbon emissions as a means to address climate change: “Once more we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in profits of companies or individuals” (§100). Here Francis clearly disagrees with the mainstream economic view, first advocated by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*, that self-interested actions by individuals and firms, regardless of the common good, will, by the hidden workings of providence, produce a spontaneous increase in the sum of human wealth and welfare.

For Francis, the pursuit of commercial wealth creation, profit, and shareholder value as the orienting goal of market-based societies should be replaced with a reaffirmation of the priority of the virtues of love and justice over the expedient pursuit of maximal utility and wealth. The economy also needs to be reregulated through a recovery of lawful government (§142) that directs economic activities toward moral ends: these should include the protection of the poor and of species and ecosystems from destructive exploitation. Law is needed to regulate commercial activities that use natural resources so that they are remodeled onto the natural laws of the earth and support rather than destroy the self-replenishing character of functioning and biodiverse ecosystems and so ensure the continuing fertility and species richness of the natural environment. But law on its own is not enough. There also needs to be participation by all parties and respect for science in assessing the risks of economic and technological projects:

We need to stop thinking in terms of “interventions” to save the environment in favour of policies developed and debated by all interested parties. The participation of the latter also entails being fully informed about such projects and their different risks and possibilities; this includes not just preliminary decisions but also various follow-up activities and continued monitoring. Honesty and truth are needed in scientific and political discussions; these should not be limited to the issue of whether or not a particular project is permitted by law. (§134)

Against the magical belief that growth in economic activities will always lead to an increase in welfare, Francis argues that change in society needs to be redirected from economic development and growth for their own sake toward the “common good” and “integral and sustainable” human development (§18). Francis observes that it is in cooperatives that communities find ways of expressing an economy of the common good and love for the land:

In some places, cooperatives are being developed to exploit renewable sources of energy which ensure local self-sufficiency and even the sale of surplus energy. This simple example shows that, while the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and grandchildren. (§179)

While Francis recognizes that Christian thought demythologizes nature, he refuses the modern mythology of political economy that it is possible to instrumentalize persons and nature in the pursuit of wealth so that a greater good may come. Francis argues that the accounts of creation in the Bible resist the instrumentalization of persons, because they “invite us to see each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object”: “Each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God himself. Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the sphere of physics and biology” (§81).

Equally, it is wrong “to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination. When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society” (§82). Here Francis is in accord with other critics of modern political economy, from John Ruskin onward, who argued that the capitalist reduction of land merely to capital and rent inevitably leads to the expropriation of land from the poor by the rich. Francis is similarly concerned with the theft of lands and forests from indigenous peoples and the poor. Hence for Francis there is an intrinsic connection between the domination of nature by a wealthy minority and the growth of “immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of

humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful,” and this is “completely at odds” with “the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus” (§82).

Francis also considers an eschatological argument for resisting the destruction of creatures and ecosystems. Tyrannical treatment of other creatures is wrong not only because of its effects on other persons but because it is denial of the “ultimate purpose” of creatures, which “is not found in us,” for “all creatures are moving forward with us and through us toward a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things” (§83). For Francis, the ultimate destiny of creatures is indicated, in that “the entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything that is, as it were, a caress of God” (§83). Here Francis seems to disagree with the most influential theologian in Catholic history, Thomas Aquinas, who argued in his *Summa Theologica* that only humans are destined to be redeemed, because other species lack an “intellective” soul.

*Laudato si’* also contains an account of the ecological and theological significance of place in the human experience of God. Francis argues that we tend to remember most fondly those places where we have most experienced “friendship with God”: “Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of our true selves” (§84). The recognition of the role of natural places as places of divine encounter, first in the life of Christ and then in the lives of the saints, is a feature of the Catholic tradition that was lost in much of Northern Europe after the Reformation, and many holy places and associated pilgrimages were desecrated or destroyed by the Reformers. Reformation spirituality and theology, in rejecting the role of creation, nature, and place in encounters between humans and the divine, tended instead to move the divine-human encounter into the sphere of human feeling. The loss of place as a category of thought in post-Reformation philosophy resulted in the tendency to discount the importance of place as an intrinsic feature of diverse and rich ecosystems and of human habitability.<sup>2</sup> But Francis argues that the recognition of the personal and spiritual value of place and of the value of creatures in beautiful and ecologically rich places ought not to result in such zealous protection of places and species that humans are subordinated or excluded from ecologically precious environments such as national parks (§90). Against the tendency of modern conservation to environmental exclusion of the poor, Francis argues that

whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence

2. Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*.

every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and underprivileged. (§93)

At the core of what *Laudato si'* calls “integral ecology” is Catholic social teaching concerning the universal destination of goods. Modern commercial priorities and business practices are wrong, first and foremost because they purloin the fruits of the earth—which are destined for the use of all the earth’s peoples—as private property for the advantage of the rich while making many others poor. That everyone has the right of use of the fruits of the earth is described as a “golden rule of social conduct” and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order” (§93). Against the neglect of the poor and of the earth, Francis calls on all people of goodwill to show love for Mother Earth, for the poor, and for future generations through personal transformation toward “ecological citizenship”:

There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity. (§211)

Much of what Francis says in *Laudato si'* underlines statements made by previous popes or contained in the broader tradition of Catholic social teaching. Where it seems to me Francis innovates in *Laudato si'* is in the suggestion that reconnections with nature, with Mother Earth, as well as with the poor are sources of spiritual and ecological transformation and that this reconnection is itself a source of love and care toward other creatures. Recognition of the deeper spiritual relations that underlie the material relations of persons with life on Earth is a valuable corrective to a theological tendency since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation to reduce human relations to nature to purely mechanical and biophysical cause and effect.

In the last major section of *Laudato si'*, Francis argues that only by rekindling deep spiritual values and connections will Christians, and believers of all religions, find it possible to remake an economy in which justice and love for creatures and persons is again at its core. Hence believers

need to be encouraged to be ever open to God’s grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace. If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over

creation, to engage in war, injustice and acts of violence, we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve. Cultural limitations in different eras often affected the perception of these ethical and spiritual treasures, yet by constantly returning to their sources, religions will be better equipped to respond to today's needs. (§200)

Just as creation is said to be a material manifestation and reflection of divine love and generosity, so ethics and religion in this passage are indicated as cultural realities in which the divine Spirit has also been and continues to be manifest. The particular spiritual forms in which ecological concern should be expressed include gratitude for God's loving gift of life and a "loving awareness" that we are connected to all other creatures in a "splendid universal communion" through which the Father links all beings. Hence humans have no right to ignore the "order and dynamism" with which God has imbued the world (§221). Industrial and technological practices that neglect this dynamism through pollution and waste are therefore contrary to created order and nature's laws. This is a particularly welcome ecological rereading of the tradition of natural law, one that is anticipated first and foremost by Protestant rather than Catholic thinkers in the twentieth century, such as C. S. Lewis with his conception of the natural law as the Tao that links all of life in a created order and for which industrial societies, with their chemical industries and large-scale machines, are so lacking in respect.<sup>3</sup> Until this encyclical, other magisterial statements of the natural law tradition, such as *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law*,<sup>4</sup> have lacked this ecological dimension.<sup>5</sup>

*Laudato si'* concludes with reflections on Christian spirituality as source of human fulfillment, through which people may resist the "constant flood" of consumer goods and technical devices, instead embracing simplicity and serenity, which are the fruits of spiritual contemplation. People who embrace such practices will "live better each moment" (§223). With this affirmation of the sacrament of the present moment, Francis resists those great contributions to human development and material and technical progress that are the Protestant work ethic and preparedness to value time in monetary ways. There is no doubt that these have been productive of many of the things that make life healthier and more secure for those who live in advanced societies, whether it is the reliable provision of potable water, pre- and postnatal care, dentistry, electric light, or antibiotics. But Francis argues that human technical and material progress have erased the spiritual values and treasures without which we are lacking in deeper purpose and meaning. Hence the common good of people and planet needs to recover its traditional place as morally and politically prior to the pursuit of private wealth and material gain.

3. Lewis, *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics*.

4. International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*.

5. Northcott, "Ecocide and Christian Natural Law."

In the attempt in *Laudato si'* to reground social and not only ecological ethics in a spiritual and not merely a biophysical ontology of life, tendencies in both Catholic and Protestant theology—especially since the European Renaissance—to treat nature purely instrumentally find a powerful counterforce. Francis resists and replaces the “magic of the market” with an ecological natural law that C. S. Lewis memorably called the “deep magic from before the dawn of time.”<sup>6</sup> The recognition in *Laudato si'* that the Creator imbued this deep magic in created order from the beginning of time and reaffirmed it out of love for the earth as well as humanity, in the incarnation of the divine Word, or *logos*, in human flesh provides a rich theological basis for the growing cultural and scientific recognition, even as the ecological and climate crises proceed apace, that everything in nature is connected.

MICHAEL S. NORTHCOTT is a professor in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. He has published twelve books and more than seventy academic papers and has been a visiting professor at the Claremont School of Theology, Dartmouth College, Duke University, Flinders University, and the University of Malaya.

#### References

- Pope Francis. *Laudato si'*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, May 24, 2015. [w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf).
- International Theological Commission. *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law*. Vatican: ITC, 2009.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1959.
- Northcott, Michael S. “Ecocide and Christian Natural Law.” In *Searching for a Universal Ethic: Multidisciplinary, Ecumenical, and Inter-faith Responses to the Catholic Natural Law Tradition*, edited by John Berkman, 179–90. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.
- . *The Environment and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- . *Place, Ecology and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

6. Lewis, *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 127.