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Pope Francis listens during an ecumenical prayer vigil before the assembly of the Synod of Bi

Pope Francis listens during an ecumenical prayer vigil before the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 30, 2023, a few days before the release of his apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* on Oct. 4. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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It's great news that Pope Francis will show up to address the U.N.'s 28th climate change conference (COP), which begins in Dubai at the end of the month. Over the past decade, no single voice, religious or otherwise, has been more important in addressing the existential issue of our time.

In his magisterial encyclical *Laudato Si'*, issued prior to the 2015 COP conference in Paris, as well as in his recent exhortation *Laudate Deum*, Francis has combined up-to-date science with a vigorous spiritual critique of the "technocratic paradigm" that has driven humanity to put life on Earth at risk.

What has not been sufficiently recognized is the degree to which Francis has engaged with the central debate in environmental thought over the past half a century: anthropocentrism versus eco- or biocentrism. In doing so, his approach has evolved into a vision that should command the attention of believers and non-believers alike.

It was the medieval historian and Protestant public intellectual Lynn White Jr. who threw down the gauntlet in a 1967 Science magazine article titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Understanding the Genesis story of Adam and Eve as teaching that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purpose," White declared, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."

Although White's declaration has drawn plenty of criticism over the years, the issue of anthropocentrism remains very much on the table, with some environmentalists arguing that protection of the environment is best justified on the grounds that it is good for humanity. A narrow focus on environmental justice — combating environmental degradation in order to protect the poor — is itself anthropocentric.

Other environmentalists reject this kind of enlightened anthropocentrism, wanting no part of "an ideology that roots all value in humanity." While anthropocentrism can be understood in a number of ways, they say, "at its core it involves the planetary-scale subordination of nonhuman organisms that denies they have value in their own right."

White himself indicated a way out of such a subordination by pointing to Francis of Assisi as representing "an alternative Christian view" that valorizes the nonhuman. There's little question that Jorge Mario Bergoglio had something of the sort in mind when he decided to become the first pope to name himself after St. Francis.

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In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the long exhortation he issued soon after becoming pope in 2013, Francis argued that humanity is inextricably connected to the natural world:

> There are other weak and defenseless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking

> of creation as a whole. We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures. Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.

In *Laudato Si*', he went on to criticize "an excessive anthropocentrism," writing, "Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes."

At the same time, *Laudato Si*' warns that "biocentrism" is not the right response to "a misguided anthropocentrism." "Human beings," it asserts, "cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued."

Now, in *Laudate Deum*, Francis goes beyond criticizing "excessive" and "misguided" anthropocentrism to suggest that the traditional Western understanding of humanity's relationship to the rest of creation needs to be updated:

> The Judaeo-Christian worldview (a better translation of the original Spanish "cosmovisión" than the Vatican's "vision of the cosmos") defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvelous concert of all God's creatures, but today we see ourselves forced to realize that it is only possible to sustain a "situated anthropocentrism." To recognize, in other words, that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures.

This idea of a situated anthropocentrism will not satisfy all eco-centrists, but it does meet them halfway — articulating a vision of an interdependent creation that at once looks back to the medieval "great chain of being" and proposes a synthesis of the anthropocentric thesis and the ecocentric antithesis.

COP28 needs to hear more about this. I suspect Francis will not fail to deliver.

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