

# Review of: "How can Ecological ethics assist in the progress of man? Towards a reflection on the Encyclical letter *Laudato si'*"

Andrew Village

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

How can Ecological ethics assist in the progress of man? - Towards a reflection on the Encyclical letter *Laudato si'*

Inocent-Mária V. Szaniszló

Thank you for this paper, which addresses the most important issue of our time. Clearly, Christians need to find ways of re-interpreting their faith for an age where the possibility that human beings might effectively destroy the planet is no longer a ridiculous fantasy. Your paper brings together some useful background from the Roman Catholic Church, and the sentiments you express are laudable and certainly attune with the sort of 'ecological ethics' I would expect from within your tradition. I think a key point that emerges is the Catholic Church's conviction that human beings are the pinnacle of God's Creation, and any solution lies in our hands. I am not sure I agree with that, and certainly I think the evidence suggests humans are not going to find 'solutions', but I value your paper as setting out a particular point of view.

I have a few comments, offered in a spirit of open, constructive debate:

1. As some previous reviews have suggested, you need to change the language you use to refer to humans. 'Man' is an English term widely seen as pointing to underlying exclusive attitudes towards women. While it is probably true that we men have largely been responsible for the mess the human race is in, if we are going to find any answers, it will be the whole human race who will be involved. So editing the language of your paper would be a good first step (and changing underlying attitudes that shape exclusive language, if they still exist, would be even better!).
2. My reading of *Laudato si'* is that implicitly (and in places explicitly) the core theology that shapes the arguments is that God created humans in a way that made them able to fit perfectly into the ecosphere, and that the problems we see today are essentially the result of The Fall and human sin. If we were sinless, it implies, we would live in harmony with Nature and the eco problems would disappear. I think you more or less own and develop this idea.

As someone trained as an ecologists, and an Anglican priest, I have watched the development of 'ecotheology' with interest, but from a distance. This is not my main field of endeavour, but I have recently written about it from my own particular experience and perspective (Village, A. (2021). Stewardship: Solution or problem? *Rural Theology*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2021.1968643> ).

I think it is naïve and possibly dangerous for Christians to argue that ecological problems arise from human sinfulness. To be sure, greed and stupidity can make matters worse, but they are not the root cause. Humans have succeeded

spectacularly as a species precisely and almost solely because they alter ecosystems to suit their needs. If they did not do that, we would be among the many species of apes that have become extinct. We evolved, spread, and flourished because we can turn unsuitable places into places where we can survive and breed. This destroys the homes and habitats of other creatures. Not because we are bad people, but because we are people. It has always been true, and it always will be. What matters is not that we do that, but the scale on which we do it.

3. That brings me to my third point, which is that the central ‘problem’ that we face is the size of the human population. What makes pollution (and especially carbon pollution) a *global* threat is almost entirely the *size* of the human population. If you look at the relationship between CO2 levels in the atmosphere and global human population size, the fit is almost perfect. The *number* of humans explains around 99% of the variation in CO2 levels. This is an extremely uncomfortable fact. Yes we might be able to change that if we were all ‘carbon neutral, but even if we were, the loss of biodiversity just from us being here in these number is immense. The COP meetings find it impossible to address because it is so geopolitically loaded. Christians find it hard to address because we have no theological way of dealing with it. God loves people, so more people means more love. The point I am making, and which I think any ecological ethic must address as its core issue, is that human population size is what makes ‘local’ ecological problems become global ones, and it is global issues that the human race is addressing now.

I am not sure what a Christian theological response is to over population, but we need one. The Catholic Church, with its well-know views on how to limit human reproduction, is going to find that really hard to address. But until it does, I think you probably need to be honest about that, and maybe your paper should address that issue at some point. I live in the UK, and if all 70+ million of us went carbon neutral tomorrow, it would affect the global CO2 by less that 0.5%, and have no effect on climate change. Even if 10 billion people were carbon neutral, we would still destroy most habitats for most creatures.... it’s what we do in order to create our particular *ecos*.

Your paper makes a useful contribution, but as long as it perpetuates the idea that the ‘problem’ is human greed and the ‘solution’ is better humans, it fails to address the real issue. I would value theologians in the Catholic tradition such as yourself addressing that issue- if not in this paper, then perhaps as an ongoing and serious debate in the Church about how humans can get our global population numbers to levels where we can share Creation without it having disastrous global consequences.