
This edited volume addresses the content of Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on ecology. Chapters written by experts from a range of disciplines, including law, economics, and journalism, make this volume distinct from other theologically-heavy edited volumes on the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (hereafter, LS). The thirteen chapters of the volume vary in topic, method, and impact.

Four parts comprise the volume: McKim’s editorial introduction (one chapter, Part I); six chapters in Part II, ‘Implementation’; three chapters in Part III, ‘Scriptural, theological and philosophical aspects’; and three chapters in Part IV, ‘Central concepts’. Editor McKim’s contributions frame the volume, with an introductory chapter that asks, among other questions, ‘How might and how should the religions of the world respond to this unprecedented challenge?’ and casually asserts, ‘it seems to me that *Laudato Si’* comes through with flying colors in terms of what its teachings add up to environmentally’ (p. 6).

Part II contains especially strong contributions (for the most part). Most noteworthy are the chapters by Freyfogle, Bagir, Clough, and Woodworth. Each of these elegantly interrogates how LS intersects with legal paradigms, ethical issues, and place-based realities while providing constructive suggestions for ways forward. Eric Freyfogle’s analysis of ‘Laudato Si’ and private property’ (Chapter 2) is essential reading given the role played by property and commodity regimes in environmental degradation. Zainal Abidin Bagir’s ‘Reading *Laudato Si’* in rainforest country: ecological conversion and recognition of indigenous religions’ (Chapter 3) delves into the implications and oversights embedded but unmentioned in LS’s exhortatory comments about indigenous traditions’ values. David Clough’s characteristically insightful chapter, ‘Rethinking our treatment of animals in light of *Laudato Si’’* (Chapter 6), illuminates the encyclical’s glaring lack of attention to animals, particularly vis-à-vis exploitative animal agriculture. And Paddy Woodworth’s chapter on ‘Does *Laudato Si’* go far enough, and is the Church on board for the climate journey?’ (Chapter 7) offers a hard-hitting chapter that raises questions about the ultimate efficacy of the encyclical while providing a rare lens into one of the encyclical’s ghost writers, Irish Columban priest Sean McDonagh, and naming the usually overlooked role of women religious in anticipating (not just instantiating) the moral commitments of LS.

In Part III, the chapter by Margaret Daly-Denton on scriptural reinterpretation and ecological crises is very useful as an overview of ecological hermeneutics in Christian theology, honed in on LS in particular. Cristina Traina’s ‘Sources of Authority in *Laudato Si’’* pairs well with Daly-Denton’s essay as it walks readers through some of the citational and rhetorical moves made by Pope Francis and...
compares those to John Paul II. Traina argues that while both men importantly ‘reunite theology with contemplation’, summoning ‘the importance of affect, or emotion, to ethics’ (p. 161), their ‘devotional readings of scripture allow them to skirt important critical perspectives, like feminist, anti-racist, and de-colonial approaches to exegesis’—leading to what Traina aptly calls ‘lectio divina for isolated white men of privilege’ (p. 158).

Part IV’s three chapters offer some connections to prior sections: Celia Deane-Drummond (Chapter 11) explores the notion of interconnectedness and the turn to indigenous perspectives (for which Bagir in Part II gives a more robust analysis). Gretel Van Wieren (Chapter 12) offers a usefully teachable overview of approaches in environmental ethics and religion and ecology, followed by an overview of practical topics raised in LS. She suggests that ‘overall Laudato Si’ may be the most comprehensive practice-oriented religious environmental ethical statement that has thus far been written’ (p. 213)—an interesting claim that I would love to see argued more fully in the context of other climate or ecological statements.

Recognizing that there are always strengths and weaknesses in the very project of an edited volume, there are a nonetheless a few things that sat uncomfortably for me. For example, it is a bit strange that one chapter (McKim’s ‘Introduction’) is given its own Part I of the volume, but does not offer much in the way of an overview of the encyclical. I am also wary of two blithe generalities found in the introduction: the frequent use of ‘we’ as a fairly universalizing first-person plural, and the invocation of relatively undifferentiated appeal to the ecological potency of ‘the religions’. On the first point, one of the major critiques of universalizing language—including the first-person plural—is that when used to refer to humanity, it can overwrite very real diversities of experience and power that are in fact constitutive of inequalities. As for ‘the religions’, the term is surely widely used in religion and ecology exhortations, but again without here acknowledging the wide diversities and disunities inherent in this term or the vagaries of viewing religions as vessels toward particular kinds of desired environmental action. Plus, given the emphasis on ‘the religions’, it is noteworthy that most engagements of this text are from a Christian and Western set of perspectives (with a clear exception being Chapter 3, by Bagir).

One other weakness is, unfortunately, Herman Daly’s chapter, ‘Laudato Si’ and population’. Of course, Daly is well and rightly known for arguing persuasively over decades that the current ecological situation ‘requires deep rethinking of economics, a shift of focus from consumerist growthism to an ethic of sufficiency’ (p. 83). Indeed, population growth and its connections to consumption are important topics for discussions of ecological and social wellbeing, and Daly is right that in LS ‘the question of population is conspicuous by its near absence’ (p. 76). As he also rightly points out, contraception and reproductive choice are important for women’s autonomy, yet the Catholic Church remains recidivistic on these matters.

But the problem arises when Daly postulates that not only birth control but also immigration control is a necessary policy ‘in the service of justice and creation care’ (p. 76). That second element—immigration policy in the service of justice and creation care—is an extremely strong claim in need of far more nuance than the author gives it. Yes, Daly’s ethical condemnation of exploitative work visa status for national economic and social gain are well taken (p. 90), but beyond that, it is not clear that the generalities or slippery slopes Daly invokes on immigration are
useful. For example, I am skeptical of Daly’s suggestion that national ‘disunity’ can be a justifying reason for immigration restriction; of his explicit but casual reliance on Hardin’s ‘tragedy of the commons’ (p. 88) without recognition of the major critiques (both ethical and economic) of that paradigm; and of the ease with which Daly would opine that ‘individual or small-scale migration is not a problem. Mass migration is a different matter’ (p. 88)—without acknowledging that environmentally-driven migration will be the most significant direct or indirect cause of migration this century, with international bodies such as the UN resolutely refusing to grant environmental migrants status as refugees.

Critiques still standing, I nonetheless find this book to be a very useful compilation of interdisciplinary engagements with LS. It is appropriate for teaching and research purposes, so the electronic version of the book will be useful in library collections.

Christiana Zenner, Ph.D.
Fordham University
Czenner2@fordham.edu