Was St. Francis a Deep Ecologist?

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On Easter Sunday 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology, following the suggestion offered thirteen years previously by Lynn White, Jr., in his seminal article on Christianity and ecology. Since then, remarkably little has been written on St. Francis’s relationship with nature and even less attention has been given to exploring his environmental philosophy. What can we learn about environmental ethics from Francis? And how can the ecological wisdom of Francis promote dialogue between Christianity and ecology?

Since the advent of the contemporary environmental movement thirty years ago, different understandings of how human beings should relate to their environment have emerged. One of the most vigorous current debates occurring among environmental circles centers around a form of ecological philosophy called deep ecology. According to Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined this term, deep ecology (as distinguished from shallow ecology, which is the usual, short-term view of nature) asks deeper questions.

The adjective “deep” stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not. . . . We question our society’s underlying assumptions. We ask which society, which education, which form of religion is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole, and then we ask further what we need to do . . . to make the necessary changes. Deep ecology seeks to challenge our culture’s fundamental human assumptions, especially those which have led us to accept materialism, militarism, and human domination over nature as normal
human behaviors. Deep ecology seeks to understand and challenge
the root causes of our planetary despoliation.

In the following pages I will discuss the deep ecology principles
lived and preached by Francis of Assisi. By his life and writings, I
hope to show, Francis demonstrated a way of living in harmony
with nature that provides a much needed basis for dialogue be-
 tween ecology and Christianity. I acknowledge the danger of
misinterpreting Francis by bringing him to a discussion in today’s
vastly different cultural context,6 but I feel this risk is outweighed
by the benefit we can gain from understanding the value he placed
on nature and his spiritual experiences in it. After introducing sev-
eral basic concepts in deep ecology, I will discuss the ways Francis
anticipated these concepts and how he differed from them. I will
conclude by proposing the development of a distinctly Franciscan
model of relating to Creation.

What Is Deep Ecology?

Arne Naess began developing the basic tenets of deep ecology in
the late 1970s, because he was frustrated by the failure of most
ecologists and scientists to address root causes of our environ-
mental crisis. He decries shallow ecology, which studies and
analyses small sections of biological life while ignoring human be-
havior that threatens to destroy entire ecosystems. Naess and his
followers want to ask more fundamental questions, such as, What
changes do we need to make in our understanding of the world so
that other forms of life can continue?

According to Naess, there are three basic principles of deep eco-
logy. First, all life, human and nonhuman, has value in itself,
independent of human purposes, and humans have no right to
reduce its richness or diversity except for vital needs. Second, hu-
mans at present are far too homogeneous with respect to
other life forms and the living earth, with disastrous consequences
for all, and must achieve a substantial decrease in population to
permit the flourishing of human and nonhuman life. Third, to
achieve this requisite balance, significant changes in human eco-
nomic, technical, and ideological structures must be made. Humans
must move toward stressing not bigness, growth, and higher stan-
dards of living, but rather sustainable societies emphasizing the
nonmaterial quality of life. From these three basic principles other
deep ecologists have identified a more precise platform, which speci-
fies political values flowing from deep ecology: the primacy of
wilderness, a sense of place, opposition to stewardship, opposition
to industrial society, spirituality, and self-realization.7

Naess believes that almost every religious movement, from Bud-
dhism to Christianity, has some elements consistent with deep
ecology already present within it, and he challenges all his readers
to identify principles of deep ecology in their respective traditions.
I would like to develop some themes in the life of Francis that coin-
cide with these principles.

Francis and Conversion

Francis Bernadone was born into a family of Italian cloth mer-
chants around 1182. His father was an active member of the
emerging bourgeois class. After several failed attempts as a knight
errant, Francis went through a long period of illness during his
early twenties, 1203-4, and after these experiences, his early biog-
graphers tell us, he began to undergo a profound change. He spent
a lot of time by himself in the wilderness, especially in some caves
near Assisi. Francis was trying to work through the beginnings of
his conversion, trying to lay a foundation for living a holy life. Tho-
mas of Celano wrote that Francis was so exhausted when he
emerged from his struggles in the cave that he "seemed to be a
different person than when he went in."

This was a period of intense inner questioning for Francis, a
time when he began to reevaluate the fundamental understanding
of life which he had held up to that point in his life. He questioned
the militarism, violence, and greed which were part of the culture
he knew. He later became one of Christianity’s most famous preach-
ers of peace and nonviolence. Beyond preaching he expressed his
conversion by his lifestyle: he moved from the comforts of the city
of Assisi to the leprosarium on the periphery, he abandoned the
selfishness of his youth for a life of itinerant preaching, and in his
later years he spurred the popularity his fame had brought him
for the life of a mystic and hermit in the wilderness. His question-
 ing and refutation of his culture’s values indicate the same probing
that Naess articulated as the essentials of deep ecology. By his life
and preaching, Francis challenged the basic paradigm of his cul-
ture by refusing to live by its secular values, and he encouraged
his followers to do the same.

How Francis Viewed Nature

Francis valued the diversity and beauty he saw in nature. Celano
wrote that Francis insisted his brothers leave a border around the
community garden untouched so that wild grasses and flowers could
Francis and Vows

beginning around 1210, the Franciscan Order was established. Francis founded the Order of Friars Minor, also known as the Franciscans, to live a life of poverty and simplicity. He believed that the life of a friar should be dedicated to serving the poor and the teachings of Christ.

Vows are a solemn commitment made by a person to dedicate their life to a higher purpose or a religious order. In the Catholic Church, vows are taken by men and women who have made a lifelong commitment to live according to the rules and regulations of their religious order.

Francis took his vows as a member of the Franciscan Order, which included a commitment to poverty, simplicity, and humility. These vows were a reflection of his desire to live a life that was focused on the needs of others and the wants of God, rather than personal desires.

In the context of the Franciscan Order, vows are a way for a person to express their commitment to living a life of poverty and simplicity. They are a symbol of the individual's dedication to the ideals and values of the order, and a reflection of their desire to live a life that is dedicated to the service of others.

Vows are not a form of legal contract, but rather a way for a person to express their commitment to a higher purpose. They are a way for a person to make a public declaration of their intention to live a life that is dedicated to serving others and following the teachings of their faith.
Francis was renowned for his humility, and his understanding of obedience should be understood in this context. Francis insisted on placing himself and his order in the hands of the church, specifically the pope and his successors, so that he might be able to hear and be obedient to Christ. Yet Francis's own humility called him to an obedience that went beyond church authority. He wrote:

Holy Obedience destroys
every wish of the body and the flesh
and binds its mortified body to obedience of
the Spirit
and to obedience of one's brother
and the possessor is subject and submissive
to all persons in the world
and not to man only
but even to all beasts and wild animals
so that they may do whatever they want with
him
inasmuch as it has been given to them from
above by the Lord.\textsuperscript{11}

Francis wanted to give himself fully to his relationship with creation, and thus he sought to be submissive to it and to encourage his followers to be submissive to it. In the late twentieth century, as the rate of species extinction surpasses one per minute, Francis's exhortation to make ourselves subject and submissive to beasts and wild animals takes on new urgency. The overarching reason for species extinction today is habitat destruction. If Franciscans are to concern ourselves with the survival of the diversity of the world's species, we must begin to defend the integrity and intrinsic right of "all beasts and wild animals" to have habitat, to have a home. To be faithful to our founder, Franciscans today must give voice to the cry of all creatures threatened with extinction and stand against the economic and political forces which encourage the destruction of their habitat.

The Canticle

Toward the end of his life Francis suffered greatly from ill health; he had gradually become blind, and some historians believe he suffered from tuberculosis and also, some believe, from watching his fraternity grow into the thousands while losing some of its original passion for poverty and simplicity. During his last few years he spent over half his time in the wilderness, deepening his experience of contemplative prayer. He withdrew with a few companions from the complexities of his order's administration to seek God in nature, and it was there that he had his most profound mystical experiences, most notably the stigmata. The hermitages in which he dwelled were really no more than small caves or huts constructed of sticks, leaves, and mud, but they were located in areas of great natural beauty.

During this twilight of his life on Earth, Francis wrote his greatest piece of poetry, "The Canticle of the Creatures." During the spring of 1225, a little over a year before his death, Francis had a dream in which a voice spoke to him and encouraged him to praise God even in the midst of his infirmities. The Legend of Perugia tells us Francis arose the next day and said:

I wish to compose a new "Praises of the Lord," for his creatures. These creatures minister to our needs every day; without them we could not live; and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator. Every day we appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and dispenser of all these gifts.\textsuperscript{13}

Francis composed "The Canticle of the Creatures" in vernacular Italian during the period when this language was branching out from Latin, and this is the earliest recorded poem in Italian. For this reason, "The Canticle" has received a great deal of attention from philologists with hundreds of articles treating it in this century.\textsuperscript{14} Sadly, it has yet to be interpreted adequately by an environmental ethicist.

This poem reveals the summit of the spiritual journey of Francis as a Christian and a lover of nature. He communicates his vision of the interconnectedness of life and an inspiring mystical unity, all in a poem that is remarkable for its spontaneity and freshness. It speaks of the essential values of what is today loosely referred to as Franciscan Spirituality: the intrinsic goodness of all the created world, the interdependence of all life, a passion for beauty and for peace, and the personalism of Francis.

As Francis sang of the diverse parts of nature, he described them in remarkably intimate terms; he expresses great joy at having lived in relationship to them. He wrote:

Praised be You, my Lord, by Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night,
and he is beautiful, and plentiful and robust
and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, for our Sister
Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us.
Europe, which understood Adam's Fall and original sin primarily in terms of disobedience, Francis understood greed also played a part. For the person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he appropriates himself to his own will, and thus destroys himself and the world in the same way. The creation of the man of God, the people of God, is an act of creation of and for others, and thus the destruction of the devil and the transformation of the community, what he calls becomes, the fruit of the knowledge of evil.

It is humanity's initial nature, the grasping, greed, and disobedience, which leads us to break Adam, the people of God, by building for ourselves, and for our relationship with creation and our Creator. Most of the specific texts elaborated by deep ecological work, because without the unbounded will places the diversity of life can't not be preserved. The use of sense of place was a way for Francis.

Another principle of deep ecological work, the religious journey, the spirituality and self-realization were also very much a part of his religious journey. While industrial society has helped many in the North- ern Hemisphere attain a more comfortable standard of living, it has also contributed to the large-scale environmental destruction being wreaked on our world. Southern Hemisphere. It certainly would be opposed to the enclosure of land and forests and the like.

Medieval Europe and capitalistic economies were more or less dominating through the enclosure of land and forests and the like. Because of its enclosure of land and forests and the like, the people of God, Francis and his brothers, could participate in the ascendant capital economy of that time. Because Francis opposed the consequences of wealth and power, which the Church had now obtained by the complicity of the papacy and the actions of the secular state, he faced severe consequences. As a result, Francis had to deal with a lot of questions, which Jesus does not address. What is the role of money in our life? How do we live or act in a world where materialism has become the main value?
based. He understood that it would create barriers to human relationships, further marginalize the poor, and inestigate threats to human dignity. He also believed that deep ecological thought was necessary to address the root causes of these issues.

The thinking of Frans and Naess has influenced many others. In recent years, the concepts of deep ecology and non-human nature have become more mainstream. The idea of non-human nature as a separate entity has been adopted by various groups, including environmental organizations, government agencies, and the general public. This has led to changes in policy and practice, such as the recognition of the rights of animals and the protection of ecosystems.

In conclusion, Frans's call for a deep ecological perspective has had a significant impact on the way we think about nature and our relationship with it. His ideas have helped to inspire new ways of thinking about environmental issues and have helped to create a more sustainable future.
AIDS only affects human life. Even though these are careless statements publicized outside of their context, and even though the public may not understand them, I believe that thinking critically about AIDS is very important. We have to question what we think we know about AIDS.

Strategies of some immunological researchers may not be directly relevant to the health situation in many developing countries. People who think they are doing a good job of solving the problem of AIDS only focus on the science and technology of the issue. They forget that the problem is also a cultural issue. If we don't get AIDS right, we are not going to solve the problem of AIDS.

When we look at the strategy of some immunologists, we see that they want to develop a vaccine. They want to develop a cure, they want to cure AIDS, and they don't think about the social context of AIDS. The social context of AIDS is very important.

Three years ago, I wrote a book called Why Use AIDS? I wrote the book as a call to endure and refuse to live this way. AIDS is a deadly disease that affects us all. It is a disease that affects the whole world.

I think that all the AIDS organizations are wrong. I think we have to change the way we think about AIDS. We have to change our culture.

The problem of AIDS is not just a scientific problem. It is a cultural problem. We have to change our culture. We have to change our thinking. We have to change our lives. We have to change the way we live. We have to change the way we think about AIDS.

It is not just a scientific problem. It is a cultural problem. We have to change the way we think about AIDS. We have to change our culture.
toward a sustainable future. We Franciscans have the obligation of promoting this model.

Wolf of Gubbio

The Little Flowers of St. Francis relates the story of when Francis visited the town of Gubbio while it was being terrorized by a huge, ravenous wolf. Francis, filled with faith in God, journeyed out of the town, found the wolf, and began to preach peace to it. The saint commanded it to stop terrorizing the citizens, pledging that they would feed him and care for his needs. He then fed the wolf into the town, preached penance and peace to the citizens, and forged a covenant between the humans and the wolf, bringing about happy reconciliation and peaceful lives. It would be impossible to verify whether these events ever occurred or whether Francis actually was able to work such a miracle, but my point in introducing this story has little to do with establishing either. I am more interested in the impact Francis had on his biographers; he was understood to be a man of peace and a preacher of reconciliation. He wanted the residents of Gubbio to be free from their fear of the wolf, so he exhorted them to reform their lives and live out gospel values. Francis did not seek to destroy or eradicate the wolf; he sought to become its brother and bring it into peaceful relationship with its environment. For our peace and well being, we humans must undergo conversion and strive for reconciliation with God, each other, and nature. This is the kernel of truth communicated by this story of the wolf, and to be faithful to Francis, we must seek to live out this message of reconciliation. Francis and deep ecology communicate many compatible truths. The essential difference, it seems to me, is that deep ecology seeks to change ideologies, while Francis prefers a spirit of fraternity and respect. I hope that the twentieth-century followers of Francis can imitate this, freeing ourselves from anger and rancor, and freeing ourselves for love, love for the soil, the flowers, the micro-organisms, the birds, the wild animals, for the diverse, incredible, intricate interconnectedness of life that St. Francis sang about with such joy. St. Francis, pray for us!

The Canticle of the Creatures

I.
Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor,
Blessed are those whom death will find in
Your most holy will, for the second death
shall do them no harm.
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

Notes
comprehensive work on deep ecology is Devali, Bill, and George Sessions, Deep Ecology (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1986).
3. The best treatise of this problem is found in Roger Sorell, St. Francis of Assisi and Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
5. Thomas of Celano, First Life of St. Francis, 6. All the biographies are taken from St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies, ed. Marion A. Habig O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972), which is com-
monly referred to as the Omnibus of Sources. All numerical references to these biographies of Francis refer to paragraphs, not pages. Celano was a
friar, a contemporary of Francis, and an eyewitness to some of the events later in his life. His was the first biography of Francis.
7. Ibid.
8. Thomas of Celano, First Life of St. Francis, 80.
9. Ibid.
10. Francis of Assisi, Rule of 1223. All of Francis’s own writings are taken from Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., and Ignatius Brady, O.F.M.,
Francis and Clare: The Complete Works (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).
11. Francis of Assisi, "Salutation of the Virtues," verses 14-18, in
Armstrong and Brady.
12. Legend of Perugia, 43, in the Omnibus.
13. See Armstrong and Brady, p. 37.
15. United States Catholic Conference, Renewing the Earth (Washington,
16. O. K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,
17. The Little Flowers of St. Francis, 21, in the Omnibus. This is a later
biography, composed at least one hundred years after the death of Francis.
Most scholars question its historical accuracy.

Choose Life

Ascetic Theology, History, and Ecology

DAVID M. SHERMAN
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I have set before you life and death... Choose life that you
and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Without God, the Human Race Is a Threatened Species

What has been the historical role of Catholic asceticism in re-
tionship to ecology and the spiritual, moral, and physical health
individuals and society? To answer this question we must confi-
the tragedy that much of Christianity has widely deviated from
ascetic moral discipline of the Apostolic Fathers. This failure
moral leadership has largely contributed to the fact that the I
man race is a threatened species, and that it is the pollution of t
sin that is destroying us. The ancient Hebrew and Sanskrit w
for defilement due to sin is tame/tama, to be "polluted" or to be
darkness," "defiled," or "ignorant." In Old Testament times the hi-
tous one (asacdic: sudhu, sattvik, or "ascetic") was to battle t
the cause of all filth/pollution. The English word ascetic der
from an ancient Greek word used to describe persons who pr
sed a religiously motivated discipline (called sadbhana in Sans-
ancient times asceticism was originally associated with the v
spread, multi-ethnic religious alliances of the Old Testament
(Jalihva Hart-Vasal).

With the coming of the gospel, Jesus Christ was received as
promised redeemer of Jew and Gentile alike. Within two hund
years of the age of the apostles, the Mediterranean regions' S