Political Obstacles and Opportunities for Catholic Teaching on the Ecology
Patrick J. Deneen

I. Immediate Political Context

Slated for release this summer, Pope Francis’s first encyclical is timed not only to influence the United Nations Climate Change Conference scheduled to be held in Paris in December 2015, but falls in an untimely fashion in the midst of a rapidly warming Presidential campaign in the United States. While there can be little doubt that an encyclical on the politically controversial subject of climate change would bring out predictable reactions from voices from the political Left and the Right in the United States at any time, the fact that the encyclical will be released as candidates jockey for political support will likely have the baleful effect of folding the encyclical into a politicized debate. This eventuality will almost certainly result in its comprehensive and fullest teaching going largely unheard in the American public arena.

Already the predictable political responses are being arrayed in anticipation of the encyclical’s release. The liberal-leaning mainstream press continues to advance its narrative that Pope Francis represents a radical, and welcome, break from his conservative predecessors in embracing more “progressive” causes such as more redistributive policies for the poor, toleration for gay marriage, general de-emphasis on matters relating to sexual morality, opposition to free-market capitalism, and support for “green” environmental causes. This narrative of “rupture” is embraced by many voices on the political Right as well, with a number of prominent voices arguing that the Pope is treading into areas reserved for “prudential” judgment, and even – when speaking on economic matters in particular – departs from his predecessors who purportedly limited themselves to matters of “morals and faith.” Some conservative voices have pulled no punches in launching preemptive attacks against the encyclical, such as the this biting attack by author Maureen Malarkey: “Francis sullies his office by using demagogic formulations to bully the populace into reflexive climate action with no more substantive guide than theologized propaganda.” More typically among leading conservative commentators, one encounters more measured cautions against drawing any specific economic or scientific policy conclusions from the encyclical, reflecting American conservatism’s efforts to inoculate against efforts to conscript the Pope’s words in support of liberal policy by appeal to “prudence” and (accurate) statements that the Vatican is not an expert on matters economic and scientific. That said, one is hard pressed to recall similar cautions that were preemptively issued at any point during the last two papacies.

Of course, this narrative of “rupture” almost wholly ignores the continuities of the Church’s call to stewardship and responsible care for Creation throughout Catholic social teaching, as well as essential agreement between what we know John Paul II and Benedict XVI to have said about care for creation, and what we anticipate Pope Francis
to say. While it’s not incorrect to acknowledge changes in emphases and formulation between Papacies, the narrative of discontinuity and rupture has been largely embraced and advanced by prominent voices on both sides of the American political spectrum and amplified in the media. This narrative primarily reflects the formative lens by which most politically-engaged, and even superficially-attentive Americans perceive most discussions of topics of public concern: either as “liberal” or “conservative,” as defined in the wake of late-19th and 20th-century historical and political developments. This distorting lens presents a significant and even potentially insurmountable hurdle to the fuller and potentially paradigm-challenging reception of Pope Francis’s encyclical.

The reasons for this are two-fold: first, specific historical and even accidental features of American history over the past half-century; and secondly, a deeper and far more pervasive and challenging set of philosophical understandings that, beyond contingent aspects of the past half-century, foster an atmosphere that necessarily leads to the splintering of Catholic social teaching.

II. Obstacles

A. American Political Alignments

The current configuration of the American political parties remains largely a consequence of a combination of circumstances that cumulatively arose throughout the twentieth-century, and especially the Great Depression and the response of the New Deal; the Cold War; and the Civil Rights movement along with profound set of changes in jurisprudence and the role of the American Supreme Court. Of main concern for the purpose of discussing the likely reception of the Papal encyclical on human ecology, we can expect much of the response in the Catholic and non-Catholic world alike to align closely with partisan positions on environmental issues. While the late-19th and early-20th century partisan positions on “conservation” tended to be internally diverse, with Republicans and Democrats alike expressing both support for efforts to protect and conserve natural resources (e.g., Republican Theodore Roosevelt became renowned for his creation of the National Park system, explicitly in the name of “conservation”), it was especially during the post-World War II and Cold War era that a pronounced divide arose between the two parties over environmental questions. With Democrats increasingly favoring active government oversight over the economy and increased regulation to combat environmental degradation, and with Republicans associating such support with a sympathy for socialist, top-down economic and social engineering, “liberalism” became increasingly synonymous with “green” causes, while “conservatism” became strongly supportive of unfettered economic growth, including the belief that many environmental issues could be resolved through market-based solutions rather than government directive or regulation. There is an irony in the frequent invocation of the role of “conservatives” in opposing “conservation,” given the etymological, historical and even philosophical relationship. Evidence of this historic relationship is more evident in places like Britain, where – among other examples that might be given – one of England’s leading conservative philosophers, Roger Scruton, has written extensively in support of “Green philosophy.” And one can also easily forget that it was common to find strenuous
support for the “mastery and conquest of nature” among American liberals of an earlier generation, such as notables like John Dewey.

Current strongly-held partisan positions doubtless influence the reception of a variety of scientific findings regarding anthropogenic climate change, with liberals arguing for the need for governmental regulation and restriction of carbon, while conservatives oscillate between outright skepticism of the findings themselves, to arguments that market forces will adequately respond to climate changes, to forthright statements that unfettered economic growth is more important than restricting carbon emissions, assuming that such restrictions would negatively impact economic growth. The papal encyclical is already being anticipated by responses shaped by these partisan positions, amplified by a media that ceaselessly echoes this divide. The encyclical will, in all likelihood, be subsumed within this narrative unless strenuous, concerted and supple efforts are made to resist this absorption – and even then, it will be an uphill battle.

B. Philosophical

While there is some degree of historical contingency in the American political alignment, the two main positions fairly closely resemble two revolutionary developments in modern political philosophy – neither of which is particularly friendly to, or influenced by, Catholic social thought, and together which are widely accepted to describe the horizon of human thinking about the “environment.”

American “conservatives” are, in the main, influenced by early-modern philosophical schools of liberalism, populated by the proto-liberals Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, and liberals such as John Locke, Adam Smith and various of the American founders. With acknowledgement of important distinctions that exist between and among these thinkers, in the main this school stresses the ideal of human autonomy and a human nature that is conceptually at once distinct from cultural and political institutions and development, and one that is also distinct from the natural world that is recalcitrant, hostile and stingy. Political and cultural institutions are brought into being both to secure stable and expanding spheres of human liberty and autonomy. The stability is provided through political arrangements that assume that self-interest is the sole reliable and constant human motivation, and that seek to harness their steady expression rather than seeking to alter or modify those motivations; while the expansion of liberty is effected by the project of human dominion over nature, conceived in mechanistic terms with humans increasingly as their mechanic masters. As Francis Bacon would articulate the modern scientific project, in order to achieve “the relief of the human estate,” nature must be “bound into service” and “made a slave,” “put into constraint” and “molded” by mechanical arts. Frequently alluding to images of “inquisition,” humans are to play the role of inquisitors, assuming that “nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trials of vexations and art.” The close alignment of the ideals of human liberty, scientific and technological advancement, and individual self-ownership that extends to property that humans should be given liberty to develop and expand through ingenuity and invention, remain central to the American party ironically known as “conservative.”
One of the most influential critical reactions to this philosophic development was, broadly, “Romanticism,” which decried the individualism, the utilitarianism and the resultant alienation of humanity from nature that arose from the instantiation of this liberal philosophy, politics and economy. Inspired especially in reactions by thinker such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hegel, Karl Marx (especially early Marx), and others, this school (again, with cognizance of many important variations) rejected key premises of early-modern liberalism, and insisted upon the need for social configurations that would allow human beings to overcome the false distance and alienation of humanity from nature and each other. Rousseau, for instance, argued that individuated human consciousness was an historical accident – not part of the fundamental distinctiveness and dignity of each human person – and sought, through various proposals, for ways of overcoming alienation, including envisioning the creation of a “General Will” into which individual consciousness would disappear and instead coalesce as a generalized consciousness. Similarly, Marx decried how the liberal, capitalist economy had alienated individuals from the objects of their labor, from each other, and from nature, and proposed that a transformative set of social and economic arrangements would allow humans to transcend the experience of self as distinct and autonomous, and instead regain their pre-conscious condition as “species beings.” In a sense, the hope was that human beings would disappear, and a different, more cooperative, communal and non-individuated species would take its place.

What is striking about both positions is that humans in their current condition (either due to their nature, or social, political and economic institutions) are fundamentally distinct from, nature. “Conservative” arguments – following the “first wave” of modernity – insist in various keys upon the continuation of the project of the conquest of nature. “Liberal” arguments posit that a new global consciousness must arise, at times even shading into arguments for the need to reduce human presence in the world (including population reduction through aggressive efforts at controlling conception and expanding abortion). The liberal position ends up arguing for the need to conquer human “nature” in order to minimize and even eliminate human impact on the environment. Human nature – a thing of “plastic,” the pliable object that is rightly subject of self-mastery – must be “altered” or rendered sterile in order to save “natural” nature.

III. Opportunities

1. Nature, not Environment

The word “environment” has become the dominant term employed to discuss the entity that is deemed to deserve our protection and respect. Its origins lie in Carlyle’s fashioning of the word in an effort to translate the German word “umgebung” – or “surrounding” – and generally has an etymological meaning of something that surrounds” or “encircles” something else. Its use as a term referring to ecology came into fashion only in the 1950s.

The widespread embrace of the term is more than merely accidental. Rather, it reflects the deeper assumption of a divide and distinction between humanity and “nature” that
informs both iterations of contemporary political philosophy. In particular, this unthinkingly deployed word reveals a more deeply unreflected assumption that there is a discontinuity between nature “out there” and human nature. As a result, the language of “environmentalism” also carries the modern denial of nature as “created order” and humans as an integral part of that creation, and even as the creature that bears special responsibility – created “in the image of God” – as steward of that order.

The continuity of the natural order and human nature has been a recurrent theme in Catholic social teaching. In his social encyclical, Solicitudo reisocialis, Saint John Paul II spoke of the need to respect the constituent and inter-related elements of the natural world: “One cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings…animals, plants, the natural elements – simply as one wishes, according to one’s own economic needs. On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos.” And Benedict XVI has also stressed this continuity: In his message on the 43rd World Day of Peace in 2010 he stated: “The book of nature is one and indivisible; it includes not only the environment but also individual, family and social ethics. Our duties towards the environment flow from our duties towards the person, considered both individually and in relation to others.”

The stress upon the language of “nature” (or “ecology”) more readily enables speakers and explicators to resist modern understandings that disconnect humankind from the “environment (whether as an object to mastered, or to be protected in a pristine fashion from the viciousness of humans), as well as to connect the encyclical to the fullness of Catholic social teaching grounded in an understanding of a created order.

2. Nature as a Seamless Garment

As these statements by predecessor Popes indicate, the language and concept of nature thereby touches on and implicates the whole of human relationships and interaction with the natural world and each other. As “creatures,” we are as much in need of “stewardship” and responsible care as the “natural world,” of which are a part and with which we are continuous. Catholic social teaching as it touches on the natural world, economics, family life, sexuality, marriage and care for the poor all partakes in this understanding of a created order of which are not simply lords, makers, or masters, but “creatures” and thereby bound by its laws and order. Just as the created order is not merely “stuff” for our use and abuse, raw material to be fashioned merely for our pleasure, use, and thoughtless disposal – leading to a “throwaway culture,” in the words of Pope Francis – so too our own creatureliness is consonant and continuous with the natural order and cannot too be viewed or used in this way without grave disfiguring consequences. Current political and philosophic understandings divide an understanding of nature deserving our defense either as nature “out there” or human nature “in here.” A task and challenge of the Church is to articulate how these teachings are continuous and drawn from an identical source. Here again, we can expect Pope Francis to echo earlier teachings, such as those advanced by Pope Benedict in Caritas in Veritate, in which he called contemporary society to a serious review of its lifestyle, which is so often prone to
hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences. Instead, he called comprehensively for an adoption of “new lifestyles” that would conform with the nature, the limits and laws of the created order.

3. Moral, not (merely) Political or Economic

Lastly, in this era in which too often the Church is criticized for being “moralistic” and judgmental, the forthcoming encyclical on human ecology is an opportunity to emphasize how central and necessary such moral understanding, language and commitments are and remain. As Cardinal Turkson (who is believed to have a significant hand in the drafting of the encyclical) has argued on several occasions, the vast and profound challenges that face humanity as a consequence of their unbridled use and abuse of the natural world cannot be redressed merely by political and economic technique. Indeed, if those are the main tools at our disposal, it is unlikely that there will be any significant change of current practices or trajectory, since a globe of willful and individualistic consumers will simply overwhelm efforts by political elites to fashion political and economic solutions. Rather, what is most needed is a deeper and general moral conversion. In a recent speech in Maynooth, Ireland, Cardinal Turkson eloquently stated:

Certainly international agreements are important, they can help. But they are not enough in themselves to sustain change in human behaviour. As Saint John Paul II put it, we require an “ecological conversion”, a radical and fundamental change in our attitudes to creation, to the poor and to the priorities of the global economy. By pointing us to the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis teaches the world that the ancient wisdom, insights and values of religious faith, most notably the tradition of Catholic Social Doctrine, can contribute something of value to the search for sustainable development, based on an integral ecology. Genuine “ecological conversion” involves the whole person. Commitment assumes a relationship, an emotional and relational attachment. It is the kind of kinship and fraternity with creation, creatures and the poor that flowed so clearly and directly from the relationship between Saint Francis and the Creator.

This is why the cultural trend of relegating religious language, religious motivation and religious faith to the sphere of the purely private and personal undermines a vital and powerful source of meaning and action in the common effort to address both climate change and sustainable development. The Judaeo-Christian insight into creation can transform our relationship from that of remote observers or technical managers of nature, to that of “brother and sister”, of nurturer and protector of all. Religious insights into creation in this sense can help to orient and integrate us as humans within the wider universe, to identify what is most important to us, what we revere, sustain and protect as sacred. Giving space to the religious voice and to its ancient experience, wisdom and insight therefore can transform our attitudes to creation and to
others in a way that purely scientific, economic or political approaches are less likely to achieve.

IV. Conclusion

The obstacles to a full and potentially transformative reception of the forthcoming Papal encyclical on human ecology are manifold and significant. Not only immediate political challenges in the form of the upcoming American presidential campaign, but longstanding philosophical currents that developed in opposition to the long tradition of Catholic philosophy and theology are arrayed against a charitable hearing of the fullness of Catholic teaching. American Church leaders must be specially cognizant of these political and philosophical challenges, and thoughtful, creative, and shrewd in how they strive to advance the Church’s teachings on the human and global ecology in a way that might begin to repair a deeply broken political discourse, and, uncoincidentally, a deeply broken world.