

**Francis: The Ecologist.**  
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**Abstract.**

*Lynn White wrote a famous paper in 1967, available online, attributing the environmental crisis to the Christian Church. It made many sweeping statements but did suggest that the exception was Francis who lived a life and promoted the idea of a unified creation which included humanity. This paper explores this view and finds that Francis, with his mentor Christ was not only a pacifist, but a promoter of non-violence; the two are different. The author does however find that Francis, at the time of the Crusades advocated non-violence and peace between the warring religions. These are political actions and Francis a non-dogmatic, even revolutionary, catholic. There are elements of interfaith in Francis's life as shown in the modern eleven Assisi declarations and an awareness that all creation is God's creation. The conclusion reached is that Francis is an original source of non-violence among many others such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and more recently the green martyrs of this century Dorothy Stang and Chico Mendes. Francis is both original and part of a long tradition, active today, which Franciscans should actively embrace. Suggestions on how contemporary Franciscans should follow the little man of Assisi are included in this age of environmental crisis.*

Francis, following the inspiration of Christ, founded a new community a new rule and chose poverty. The rich church, according to Lynn White, was one cause of violence against creation. Francis was different. His views were tolerance, peace and non violence. Christendom, from the time of Constantine, had two contrasting traditions, violence and war or pacifism, and peace. Non violence was new, but it is found in the teachings of Christ. These traditions are still being worked out today as humanity finds itself in environmental crises caused by mankind's greed. This paper explores these two alternatives and Francis's place in humanity's changing culture. Pacifism is a refusal to fight and kill even in a just war. Pacifism grew out of early Christianity and can be found in many persecuted sects from the Manicheans to the Quakers. Non-violence however, advocates political and spiritual changes persuaded by non-violent actions. Was Francis, following Christ, who doesn't come more political, also a practicing non-violent activist. He certainly sought change through his preaching and his lifestyle. The two cannot be separated, but he was concerned for his God and creation as well as humanity. This was new thinking in the century of the crusades.

Early human beings caused extinctions wherever they hunted or lived. In the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Asia and Europe species disappeared as human beings established themselves in new environments. They changed the land and the ecology. Mammoths, tigers, moas and many other large species, including fish and whales disappeared from creation's record because of the careless greed of homo sapiens. Only in one continent did this mass extinction not occur; Africa, where humanity originated, retained its large species. This was where nature and human beings co-evolved and the natural world was cautious of this mammal we call homo- sapiens... the wise ape!. Were these humanity's original sins?

This desolation did not only include hunting, but also the clearing of forests, the investment in agriculture, the human importation of plants and animals outside their natural ecological niche. Humanity demonstrated, as an intelligent animal, a selfishness. This selfishness was to, and still does, cruelly dominate the planet yet an empathy with the wild can be found in so called primitive peoples.

The early religions were animistic and pagan. However human beings possess an innate spiritual understanding and found spirits in trees and springs. Eventually many of these sacred sites became churches. The early Celtic Christians kept this concern for nature in their culture. Worship became less cruel although monastic disciplines were tough but lives were short and hard. These saints 'peregrinated' all over Europe, reaching as far south as Italy and the Bobbio monastery. Could this have influenced Francis?

Between 800 and 300 BC ethical religions emerged. These were the ethical roots from which Judaism, Christianity, Islam Confucianism, Buddhism and others grew. The basis of these religions was a common ethic, a principle known as the golden rule 'do not do to others what you would not have done to you'. This later developed into 'love thy neighbour as thyself' plus a recognition that there needs to be reciprocal response to a loving God. This ethical base of the eleven great religions is one that deserves contemporary exploration in an age when interfaith has become important especially in the practice of creation concern. These have been explored in the eleven Assisi declarations.

Christianity after Constantine's conversion, apart from the almost heretical extremes of the Celtic fringes of Europe, became a bureaucratised enforcement of fixed beliefs, not the explorative theology of the early church as seen in Paul's epistles or the interaction between Greek philosophy and Judaic morality where the Socratic principles of love, justice, friendship, piety, tolerance and courage were questions which pointed to the divine. From the early times there were pacifist heretics such as the Cathars, Bogomils, Manicheans, Anabaptists and individuals such as Pierre Valdes reacted against the almost constant warfare of the church. Perpetual war was the basis of power. The Quakers and others adopted an antiwar stance, quoting the teaching of Christ.

The church had a rigidity of enforced belief where heretics were executed. This rigidity caused the tragedies of the crusades, still seen differently by Muslims and Christians. The medieval and enlightenment technology used by Columbus and those who followed him led to the discovery of new continents and the exploitation of nature alongside the subjugation and massacre of native peoples. The humanity of those few, like Bartholomew de la Casa and his Jesuits and their conversion of native peoples as neighbours were eliminated, today seen as a basis for liberation theology. The church and civil hierarchy, using slavery, disease, massacre, despoliation and destruction of this New World and its riches, used domination and conquest to subdue, profit from, and acquire these new lands, all with the approval and support of the church hierarchy and the Pope. Many saw the natives as subhuman, only fit for slaves.

Science and nature was eventually explored by the churches and a new theology of creation, based on a literal approach to Genesis was believed. Newton described gravity and its forces as a theology and science. A whole galaxy of religious scientists began to explore the natural world, but still believing in the creation story as found in Genesis and the command of God to man to dominate. This dogma reinforced the belief in the separateness and rightness of the white man became part of the enforced creed. This was shown in the church's challenge to Galileo over the place of the Earth in our solar system. Eventually the concept of God became unnecessary to many scientists and the cult of atheism grew as spirituality declined. Today we have the modern exponents from the agnosticism of Darwin to the fundamental atheism of Richard Dawkins and others who find religion a challenge to their rationality.

From the Middle Ages a cult of violence developed. The wars of the crusades, the jihads of today, the violence of Northern Ireland, the massacres of the Congo, all have religion and Christianity as roots of this violence; a violence whose spiritual basis is competition and whose nurture is profit and corruption.

Francis was different. He crossed the no-mans land between the crusaders and Saracens armies and preached love and peace yet failed to convert. These were new and even heretical beliefs, including a concern for nature and the animal soul. The refusal of Christ to respond to the charges that led to his crucifixion is followed by the acceptance of the stigmata by Francis. These are examples of non-violence. There is no doubt that Christ and Francis were pioneers of non-violence. These ideas have been revived under the influence of the non-violence movement, the inspiration of Gandhi and the writings of the atheist naturalist Edward Wilson and others. There is now a Christian theology of non-violence whose spiritual basis is partnership, sharing and enough, all Franciscan characteristics, and these are sourced from the gospel teachings.

This modern faith has no formal creed. Originating in the golden rule, Buddhism and Hinduism, it was an element of belief the Celtic saints, then came the Franciscans alongside other revolutions in ethical thinking. In modern times there is the teaching and example of Thoreau, Leopold, Muir, the Quakers and Edward Wilson. Christians and Franciscans in particular, a need to place the Earth, as Francis did, within our family or divinity of life, what science calls biodiversity. Human beings need to find a centre in their lives where they live in partnership with creation instead of competing with it. Humanity is losing sight of that common good which is the essence of the 'golden rule.' This ethic of cooperation, not competition, is now supported by the modern evidence of evolution and the Gaia theory. It has a spirituality and this is where many scientists find God. The traditions of poverty, love and joy that Francis founded will be found in a future of climate stress where enough will be a principle. This is where the mythos of religion and the logos of science meet in the ethics of creation.

There were two great social inventions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The first was Gandhi's exploration of non-violence; a simple ecological lifestyle and enough as a political force. The other was the National Park. Muir's inspiration of the Sierra Club and the great national parks, an inspiration now found on every continent, bar Antarctica, and every park is different. Here wilderness is sustained. In some areas like Oregon they untouched by humanity where bears thrive in others such as the Lake District, in what is a man made landscape, nature flourishes. In Africa space is given to large wild animals where they are no longer hunted.

There is however no place on this planet which is not touched by human beings and their greed. There is nowhere in the world where the increased carbon does not contaminate the atmosphere and the seas. There are so few places left where nature naturally evolves, untouched by humanity's waste with a freedom to evolve and fulfil its potential without human interference, intended or careless. Even sympathetic conservation is interfering with natural processes. Contemporary human beings no longer see themselves as part of nature but separate from it yet complain about it when climate change causes the seas to rise, storms damage, drought dries the land and fires burn, the waters flood and the cold comes and the planetary resources which humanity has so carelessly wasted have gone. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggest adaptations and mitigations as solutions but for the moment these still divide us from our place in the natural world where human caused extinctions are happening at an unprecedented rate. The human record of what might have been and the garden becomes a bleak opportunity, but then without human beings there could be no intelligence or spirit to appreciate its beauty and sanctity, or humility to accept and serve creation and recognise that we are part of this divine invention. Salvation is still possible and God needs his children.

One answer to these moral dilemmas is to follow Francis. Francis saw humanity as part of creation and creation as God's love. This is both a threat and a promise, for if we despoil God's creation it will rebound on us, if we care for the Earth it will care for us. If humanity refuses to live sustainably then our species will not be sustained. Humanity's calling, given what we have done, must be to care for creation, first by reversing the damage, then by adopting creation centred simple lifestyles seeking the common good. Then the necessary changes will happen. If human beings live lives, thinking they are separate from creation they will despoil their only home, this planet. We humans don't need to wear the tattered robe that Francis wrapped around him, but we do need to live a more simple carbon free life. Francis preached to the birds and they responded, he saw God in a creation and met fearlessly with the wolf. He called the moon and sun brother and sister and found a spirituality in nature. He slept on the bare ground and wrapped himself in that tattered robe that speaks so clearly of his asceticism. The inspiration today is that theology and faith are researched as Earth sciences, for ecology has a spiritual dimension. This ethic has still much to teach us. Gandhi explored a modern version of Francis's simplicity. It was used by Martin Luther King to support his movement for freedom. Dorothy Day saw freedom in Catholic Action. Sister Dorothy Stang and Chico Mendes were martyred for their stand for the forest and its peoples. There is a grass roots movement across the planet called in UK the Transition Town Movement, but in USA Downsizing and in

Australia Downshifting. There are now over one million ecological communities across the planet. Human beings are changing and learning. Arne Naess's philosophical movement Deep Ecology stresses the simple lifestyle in harmony with nature. There is much more to be discovered in the hopes of what is called a New Age. All this can be traced back Francis, now the saint of ecology, who sought to lead human beings from self centred greed to peace non-violence and joyful giving and living as part of creation. Non-violence is coming of age.

Christians now have 'two books'. The first is their bible, a book of ethics, moral and spiritual guidance. It is the spiritual basis of our Christian faith. The contemporary Christian has a second book, the book of science. The research into ecology has given us explanations how nature works from the DNA of all cells to the mysteries of the universe and the planet on which our survival depends. This is a description of creation or how God works. Humanity now understands, and it imposes ethical responsibilities not to despoil the creation for which humanity is a steward and for which we need to take responsibility.

We can see how easily selfish self centred human beings saw themselves as separate from creation, how they over exploited the material of the planet, first by destroying the complex ecology and later through use and misuse of energy sources and perhaps by becoming too many; an unbalancing plague on the planet. The foundations of this change is found in the life and teachings of the revolutionary Francis: a respect for all creation, a humility concerning our place in creation and an adoption of a restoration of the Earth and the joy of life. Today we know what teaching is needed as well as the practical application of science and the spirituality of creation in line with the gospels that guide us.

Franciscans are revolutionaries for enough at a time when human survival will depend on adopting the principles of sustainability. A recent WWF Report stressed the fact that human beings are using at least one and a half planets resources when we only have one. Such profligacy is not sustainable. The 'footprint' of the average UK citizen is nine when it should be one. Greater than it should be and in the USA 20 times. Christians need to be heretical, like Francis in that they should recognise the incarnation and resurrection as a gift to all life not just our species. A solution to our contemporary crises may lie in the religious trying to follow the little man of Assisi. He is an example to the whole of humanity and creation, with his tattered gown of enough, as a life giving principle. With that modern representation for all faiths the eleven Assisi declarations we demonstrate toleration.

The Basilica at Assisi is a building that I feel that Francis would not have approved. It is too big to honour a life that was spent, by choice, in poverty, simplicity service and love of creation. The religious inspiration that Francis, the little man, still offers is so radical that it could change the world if those who are followers of Christ are prepared to take it up, in an era when change is essential. The prize that he offers is one of a sustained and sustaining humanity living in harmony with a loving God and his creation.

Peace will come when mankind lives a non-violent life where everyone has enough and asks for no more. Somebody must begin this transition. The lessons that science, our bible, Francis and many many others have shown us is that they already have.

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