Francis of Assisi and the Diversity of Creation

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Francis’ view of nature has been seen as positive in an ecological sense even by those who are for the most part critical of Christianity’s attitude to nature, such as Lynn White, Jr. I argue that one element of Francis’ uniqueness was that he saw the diversity of life as an expression of God’s creativity and benevolence and attempted to carry out that vision in ethical behavior. Much of what has been written about him has precedents in traditional hagiography, but there remains an unmistakable impression of originality. It has been noted that Francis insisted on the goodness of creation, used terms of family relationship to refer to creatures other than human, and preached to them. However, another element has escaped notice: his emphasis on the presence of God in the diversity of created entities and his desire that humans should rejoice in this diversity and glorify God for it and with it. His devotion did not immediately dissolve multiplicity into oneness, but glorified God in each created being and delighted in their individuality. He advocated that praise be expressed by acting in ways consistent with respect for created diversity, not only by observing a strict rule of abstaining from harm to living beings, but also in positive treatment of all creatures. Nature took its meaning not from its serviceability to mankind, but from its expression of the multiple forms of God’s benevolent presence.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and guides us, and brings forth diverse fruits along with colorful flowers and herbs.

—Francis of Assisi 1

INTRODUCTION

When you see the statue of a friar with birds, you know who it is. The most prevalent image of Francis of Assisi in art and popular imagination associates him with nature: he is the saint of the birds, the saint of the wolf. He has had

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this status from his own time to the present. Many believe he epitomizes a way of appreciating and treating nature, not the dominant mode in Western Christian thought and action, but an attractive view and possible corrective. This view was held by Lynn White, who in a very influential article first suggested him as the patron saint of ecology. Francis' devotion to the powerless among humans, but also among all living creatures, makes him a figure that appeals to Christians of every denomination, and others concerned with environmental and social problems from religious and nonreligious standpoints around the world. What makes him such a talismanic figure? Was his view of nature unique? Did it differ from that of his contemporaries? Was he an example of relationship to the rest of creation that convinces people of his sincerity as no sermon could? Or was he, as John Cobb once suggested, too remotely medieval to serve as an effective model of ecologically responsible Christianity?

I argue that one element of his uniqueness was his vision of diversity as an expression of God's creativity and benevolence, and his attempt to carry out the implications of that vision in a way of life and ethical behavior. In examining the written sources, I have given primacy to expressions of Francis himself and have sifted through accounts by others to find the consistent grain of his thoughts, feelings, and actions among the chaff of the purposes and more or less conventional attitudes of his interpreters.

FRANCIS AND TRADITION

In a valuable book reviewing the nature stories of Franciscan literature, Edward Armstrong shows that many of Francis' attitudes have precedents in biblical, early Christian, and medieval ideas about nature. Susan Bratton places Francis in the tradition of hermits who retired to wilderness and befriended animals. Paul Santmire associates him with a theological trend, unfortunately not dominant, which affirms creation as containing intrinsic value. An incisive study by Roger Sorrell places Francis firmly within his late medieval context and shows where he was most original.

Among motifs applied by hagiographers to Francis, these authors recognize several with precedents in the lives of earlier saints, although they may have

\[3\] John B. Cobb, Jr., Is It Too Late?: A Theology of Ecology (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Bruce, 1972), p. 48.
been true of Francis as well. Fleeing from houses and cities to caves and other natural spots is a commonplace among ascetics. Francis kept birds, a lamb, and a cicada, but many before him had pets; some even who tamed lions. Some monastic writers, such as Basil, thought of natural landscapes as beautiful, as Francis did of the view from La Verna. Praising the works of creation, speaking of them as praising God in their own ways, and even exhorting them to glorify God, go back to biblical passages often repeated in liturgies in the Middle Ages, such as Psalm 148 and the Song of the Three Children, and Francis continued a long tradition when he did these things. Respecting nonhuman creatures, speaking of them in human terms, and giving moral instruction to them, which Francis exemplifies, were also habits of the hermits. Love of other creatures, even wild and seemingly unlovable ones, had appeared before, but it was such a notable characteristic of Francis that he became the archetype of this attitude.

Other traditional ideas ascribed to Francis are more problematic. One is a tendency to regard animals and plants as symbolic of virtues, vices, and doctrines. This was the method of bestiaries, the most widespread writings about animals, which invoked farfetched allegories to give edifying meanings to the names and supposed habits of beasts real and imaginary. Francis remarked on the symbolism of creatures that he encountered, but his comments were simple and biblically based. For example, when he saw a worm in the road, he recalled prophetic words held to refer to Christ, “I am a worm and no man.” Although he uses living things as didactic instruments, but Francis also treated them as having of intrinsic worth. He picked up the worm and put it among vegetation; others might have referred to the worm’s scriptural meaning and then stepped on it. Francis’ nativity scene with live animals at Greccio added a new element to traditional portrayals, but is another example of the use of living creatures for doctrinal purposes.

Another idea common in hagiographies is that saints possess the authority to command living and nonliving things. Just as Patrick ordered that snakes abandon Ireland, Francis bade birds to be silent and ants to leave so as not to bother listeners to his sermons. While real events may lie behind these accounts, their purpose is to portray their heroes as thaumaturges, able to exercise control over nature to demonstrate power. Even more bothersome for those who want saints to portray ecological virtue is the ability to curse living things. A tale of dubious historicity says that Francis pronounced over a sow

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10 I Celano 80; Psalm 22:6.

11 I Celano 84; Bonaventura, Legenda Maior 10:7
that had killed a lamb a judgment so terrible that she not only died, but no predator would devour her carcass. In such cases writers used traditional themes, applying them to Francis to aggrandize their subject.

THE ORIGINALITY OF FRANCIS

One truly atypical theme of Francis is his central characteristic: his insistence on the goodness of creation. All his writings about created things are positive; he sees God in them, worships God through them, and gives thanks for them. He regards even “sister Death” as a blessing. When he remembers the biblical account of creation, he does not dwell on the fall or the grant of dominion, but the repeated pronouncement of God that all things created are “good.” He believes in what Matthew Fox calls “original blessing.” This blessing is worthy of note because the attitude to creation was in his day ambivalent. Innocent III, a pope whom Francis met, and who had the good sense not to order him to be silent, saw man as equal to the beasts, such that this equality lowered man. In his De miseria humane conditionis, he wrote:

“The Lord God formed man from the slime of the earth,” an element having less dignity than others. Thus, a man, looking at sea life, will find himself low; looking upon the creatures of the air, he will know he is lower; and looking upon the creatures of fire he will see he is lowest of all, for he finds himself on a level with the beasts and knows he is like them. “Therefore the death of man and beast is the same, and the condition of them both is equal, and man has nothing more than the beast. Of earth they were made, and into earth they return together.”

The attitude expressed by the pope is the opposite of that of the saint, described as follows: “He discerned the hidden things of Creation with the eye of the heart, as one who had already been released into ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God.’”

Also original is Francis’ use of terms of family relationship to refer to created entities. When he speaks of “Brother” Falcon or “Brother” Fire, he is recognizing them as members of one family, not making them Friars Minor. When he addresses “Sister” Moon and “Sister” Water, he means that they have a common birth in creation, not that they are members of the Poor Clares.

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12 2 Celano 111.
13 Il Cantico di Frate Sole, 1:27.
14 Matthew Fox, Original Blessing (Santa Fe: Bear, 1983).
15 Genesis 2:7.
18 1 Celano 80; Romans 8:21.
he bethought him of the first beginning of all things he was filled with a yet more overflowing charity, and would call the dumb animals, however small, by the names of brother and sister, forasmuch as he recognized in them the same origin as himself. Earth is a special case, since he calls her both sister and mother, and like the mother in a family, he says that she “governs us.”

Certainly an innovation of Francis was his practice of preaching directly to nonhuman creatures. A sermon to the birds is the most widely known incident of his life, and he also preached to fish and flowers. While earlier texts used the literary device of calling on creatures to praise God, Francis was first to take so literally the command to “preach the gospel to all creatures.” In doing so, he recognized their intrinsic worth as fellow creatures of God.

One of the most radically new of Francis’ ideas about natural things was his extension of the monastic vow of obedience for himself to every other creature. He wrote, “Obedience subjects a man/ to everyone on earth./ And not only to men,/ but to all the beasts as well/ and to the wild animals,/ So that they can do what they like with him./ as far as God allows them.” This principle is an extreme form of a rule to abstain from harm, reminiscent of the Jains, who advise sweeping one’s path and breathing through gauze to avoid killing insects, or the Buddhist who offers himself as food to a starving tigress. For Francis, it meant allowing mice to run over his body when he was sick and regarding it as wrong to extinguish Brother Fire when that living element was eating his cloak. Francis took this vow as seriously as he did that to Lady Poverty, but his friars found it just as impossible to follow in its pure form.

FRANCIS AND DIVERSITY

There is another element of his creativity in respect to nature that has escaped notice: his emphasis on the presence of God in the diversity of created beings, and his desire that humans should rejoice in this diversity and glorify God for it and with it, and act in ways consistent with respect for it. This aspect of his uniqueness consisted of praising God through the diversity of created species. He expressed it as a life-affirming, creation-affirming joy which did not immediately dissolve the multiplicity of creation into oneness, but which glorified God in each of the created beings and delighted in their individuality and distinctness.

In the Song of Brother Sun, for example, he names various created entities one after another and praises them with God. He often uses words that

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19 Bonaventura, Major Life 8:6.
21 Armstrong, Saint Francis: Nature Mystic, p. 164, n. 7; see I Celano 61; I Celano 81.
22 Mark 16:15.
24 “Il Cantico di Frate Sole,” line 5.
emphasize their number and distinctness. He describes them in terms of their particular qualities; Sister Moon is “bright, precious, and beautiful” and Brother Fire is “happy, powerful, and strong.” When he comes to “Our Sister, Mother Earth,” he says that she “produces various fruits with many-colored flowers and herbs.” The Italian word he uses to describe the productions of Mother Earth is diversi, which means the same as its English cognate, “diverse.” Francis is praising God and Earth for the diversity of life.

Francis is credited with a sacramental view of creation. If God’s grace is mediated to people through elements such as water, wine, bread, and oil, why cannot it also be received in an analogous way from any creature? That is, he contemplated “grain, vineyards, stones, meadows, brooks, gardens, earth, fire, air, wind” with joy and found himself uplifted and freed with them. The enumeration of a number of individual types of creature as means of God’s blessings is typical of Francis and of literature referring to him.

Francis did not refer to nature as an abstract. Indeed, he never uses the word natura in spite of its ubiquity in medieval writings; nor does he speak of an idealized “Creation.” His mind is lifted to God by the proximity of a specific form of life in its individuality. He experienced mystical ecstasy while contemplating a flower. When a fisherman gave him a living waterfowl, he gazed at its form for a considerable time until “returning to himself as from another place after a long while,” he released it. He had a similar experience with a fish, which he lowered into the water and praised God for it, spending time in rapt devotion. Nature mysticism is rare in the Western tradition and Francis is its chief representative; nevertheless, his nature mysticism is not the sort that begins by swallowing up the many in the One. Of course, God is the One for Francis, but He is approached through diversity. Francis saw God expressed in the morphological variety of creation; he valued every species and was drawn into wonder and prayer by individual creatures.

His view can be distinguished from the idea of creaturehood as a brutal state, which is evident in Innocent III and the medieval Church generally. It is also unlike the merely allegorical interpretation of created things that is characteristic of bestiaries and other medieval literature on nature. Francis is far from reducing nature to a literary conceit, as occurs in Adam de Lille and the Chartrist school with the “goddess Natura,” who is not a deity to be worshipped in her own right, but a classically inspired appendage to theology that almost succeeds in dissolving species into metaphor. Also, the simple and un-

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25 Ibid., lines 11, 19.
27 I Celano 80-81.
28 II Celano 167; Bonaventura, Major Life 8:8.
29 I Celano 61
schooled Francis was not a scientist. For him, value was found primarily in praising God through creatures and rejoicing in them, not in gaining intellectual understanding of them.

Moreover, Francis’ view of God and nature is not a form of pantheism that emphasizes oneness and loses the individual in an amorphous whole. Francis delights in seeing God through each form of Creation, one and all. In this respect, it is an active panentheism that recognizes the immanence of God in each species and individual, a view that is sometimes confused with pantheism, but is experientially quite different from it. Lynn White called Francis a “panpsychist.” This characterization is not correct if it means that all beings share a single soul that belittles their individuality. For Francis, diversity is a positive value in creation. Perhaps it is panpsychism only in the sense that each creature shows the creativity and immanence of God.

FRANCIS AND THE CREATURES

Francis referred to the creatures as his brothers and sisters. Siblings are prized as relations, but also for their individuality, and in this sense his behavior toward living things can be seen as an ethical application of reverence for each kind of creature in the diversity of creation. “What is the proper way to treat a brother or sister?” William Cook asks, and answers for Francis, “[They] are not to be exploited or manipulated; they are loved and respected because of the intimate link between siblings. . . . To expand this concept to include everything that exists and to do it seriously leads to some rather startling behavior on Francis’ part.” His care for animals led him to avoid killing them or allowing them to be killed for him, even for food, although he was not a strict vegetarian. He asked for captive animals, and cared for or released them. If wild animals were given to him, he treated them gently and let them go. Often they sensed his friendship so strongly that they stayed near him instead of fleeing. In the case of domestic animals, he asked someone to care for them. He kept some creatures temporarily as pets, although never in captivity. He sang antiphonally with a nightingale and a cicada. A falcon served voluntarily as his alarm clock. He once reproved a greedy robin, but the only story of his treating an animal harshly is that of cursing the sow, a domestic animal that had killed another one. There is no evidence that he wished to rid the natural world of predation. But there is evidence that his respect for the environment extended beyond living things; he avoided step-

33 II Celano 171; Legenda Perugina 84; Bonaventura, Major Life 8.9.
34 II Celano 168; Bonaventura, Major Life 8.10.
ping on water and treated rocks with reverence. In all these ways, he acted so as to preserve natural variety.

FRANCIS, THE DIVERSITY OF CREATURES, AND ETHICS

If Francis’ caring treatment of all sorts of creatures had been the practice only of a saint, it might be regarded as charming but eccentric. That is what Cobb thought when he observed, “Few of us will want to preach to birds,” and that is how the majority treats it. But Francis intended it to be the rule for his religious followers, and wished it for all humankind. He not only was kind to creatures personally, but “if anyone did not treat them properly he was upset.” He intended the Song of Brother Sun as a corrective of the common attitude to the many created forms in the world. As he chided his contemporaries, “Every creature under heaven serves and acknowledges and obeys its Creator in its own way better than you do.” He had a didactic motive: “Therefore, for His glory, for my consolation, and the edification of my neighbor I wish to compose a new Praises of the Lord concerning 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 fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and Dispenser of all these gifts. . . .” Francis wanted such praise to be reflected in positive action. He was as eager that his followers treat their fellow creatures well as that they minister to the sick; he extended the concept of community beyond the religious order to every human being, and beyond the human race to every natural creature.

The story of the wolf of Gubbio illustrates this point. Francis did not simply order the wolf to stop attacking animals and humans around the town; he established a covenant between the wolf and the human community, binding the people to feed the wolf in return for his forbearance. The Franciscan covenant would have other ramifications: he not only urged people to feed wild birds and animals in winter, but thought the Emperor should make the practice mandatory, as well as providing feed for oxen and asses on Christmas Eve. Honoring this covenant would mean the extension of Christian almsgiving to many creatures in addition to the human poor, a practice he also strongly supported. The praises of pardon and peace that Francis added to the Song of Brother Sun also have wider application to all creatures. He urged that laws be enacted to prohibit the killing of “our sisters the larks.”

35 Speculum Perfectionis 118; Armstrong, Saint Francis: Nature Mystic, p. 10.
36 John B. Cobb, Jr., Is It Too Late? p. 48.
37 Legenda Perugina 49.
38 Admonitions 5.
39 Legenda Perugina 43.
40 Speculum Perfectionis 114.
41 Ibid.
Because he wrote the *Salute to the Virtues* as a song to be sung by his human Little Brothers and Sisters, he clearly intended the teaching of obedience to every creature to apply to them as well as himself. Although he saw the serviceability of many creatures as a positive attribute, Francis did not agree with Aristotelians who held that all things have as their purpose the service of humankind. He believed, according to Eric Doyle, that “Nature has a meaning-in-itself because it is created by God, it does not have its value or meaning purely from man.”42 The relationship of human and nonhuman should rather be one of mutual dependence.

Among the brothers and sisters of the orders that he founded, he advised a number of practices that encouraged preservation of the diversity of life. He directed his friars who worked in gardens not to cultivate all the ground for vegetables, but to leave certain areas for flowers. “He bade the gardener not dig up the outlying parts round the garden, in order that in their seasons the greenness of grass and beauty of flowers might proclaim the beauteous Father of all things.”43 He preferred that friaries should be surrounded not by walls, but by hedges where birds could nest and sing. Friars who were woodcutters he instructed not to cut down trees, but to remove branches carefully so the trees could continue to grow.44 Often he asked his brothers to care for birds and animals.

**THE LEGACY OF FRANCIS**

Images of Francis preaching to the birds and shaking the wolf’s paw quickly became popular motifs in Christian art. It is unfortunate that the spirit of his recognition of diversity as a visible manifestation of God’s creative power, and treatment of the community of creatures in the context of praise and care, did not remain equally influential. A number of his early companions treasured it. Francis’ vision of nature inspired a few exceptional spirits such as Douceline, Anthony of Padua, and Jacopone da Todi, who emulated him in appreciation of animals and plants. Francis’ interest in the physical universe, in spite of its nonintellectual character, may have been a stimulus of the flourishing of science among Franciscan scholars. But Franciscans became embroiled in other issues, particularly the question of how strictly they should observe the vow of poverty, and neglected the aspects of Francis that made him patron saint of ecology. Even during Francis’ life, the order adopted a rule forbidding friars to keep animals and though it was rescinded, possibly at his insistence, it was reimposed in 1260. In Italy generally, hunting songbirds continued as sport and

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43 II Celano 165.
44 *Speculum Perfectionis* 118.
source of table delicacies in spite of Francis’ words against it, and with the spread of firearms, it became wholesale slaughter.

The feast day of St. Francis has become an ecological celebration in many places, and a dozen years ago the Italian government designated the heights near Assisi a national monument, prohibiting hunting there. The measure had support from Cardinal Silvio Oddi and Franciscan leaders, and was therefore not openly resisted by local hunters. But they continue, nevertheless, to shoot songbirds, and a recent count of species has revealed that in the Carcieri, a monastic retreat above Assisi where a section of forest is protected, biodiversity is relatively low.45

Biodiversity is a key idea in modern ecological and environmental thought. It began as a concept in systems ecology. If an ecosystem is composed of a large number of species, with many interrelationships, it is held to be relatively stable. The diversity of life has been described and advocated as a positive good by Edward O. Wilson.46 Bryan G. Norton examined it as a philosophical principle,47 and a number of writers have examined its social and economic applications.48 It is even the subject of an international treaty approved at the Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

While Francis’ thought per se cannot be held to prefigure ecology, his attitude has well been recognized as a precursor of positive environmentalism. Not least is this true of his appreciation of the diversity of creation and his recognition of the unique value of every creature.