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## An Ecumenical & Interfaith Perspective on Social & Ecological Justice

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*Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew I*

In recent years, the world's faith traditions have been increasingly turning their ethical gaze toward the intersection of social, economic and ecological issues as they seek collaboration with members of other faiths. There are many organizations representing such efforts, including: the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (1), GreenFaith (2), and the environmental arm of Religions for Peace (3), among many others worldwide. Recognizing that despite our differences we must all come together to protect our common earthly home and humanity's ability to flourish and prosper within it, all of these groups embody a spirit of interfaith cooperation and mutual commitment to social justice and environmental stewardship. These aspirations are shared by Pope Francis, which he has expressed so eloquently in *Laudato Si'* (5).

In this encyclical he develops the idea of an integral ecology, in which the social, economic, cultural and ecological dimensions of reality are understood holistically as inter-related aspects of life on planet earth. The ecological crisis – including climate change, mass extinction, deforestation and pollution – is arguably the most pertinent issue we face as a global society, and is one which can unite the world's faith traditions in moral solidarity for the pursuit of the common good as well as raise awareness that many global social problems are in fact interrelated.

In September of 2017, Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church & Patriarch Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church (6), issued a joint letter in which they denounced greed for

limitless profit in markets as one of the primary sources of ecological devastation. Prior to this, Pope Francis has denounced economic greed and avaricious behavior in business in both *Evangelii Gaudium* (7) & *Laudato Si'* (8), where he not only highlights the socio-political and socio-economic dimensions of the current ecological crisis, but in which he lauds Patriarch Bartholomew for his early efforts to foster an ecological consciousness among both Christians and the people of the world at large over the past thirty years.

Reflecting on the Greek linguistic and intellectual tradition, we find a deep connection between economics and ecology that has often been overlooked within our contemporary global civilization. The terms "ecology" and "economics" share a common root: the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home or household. In this sense, economics implies the proper management of a household or political community, while ecology, implies the study of how beings co-habitat together in a shared and common dwelling, or environment. Yet, in order to properly manage an *oikos* one must first acquire a sound understanding of the *oikos* she wishes to manage. To this end, a proper eco-nomics would attentively consider, if not rely on, eco-logy to ensure that it can properly manage an interrelated and cohabitational community of living beings with the aim of maintaining their mutual flourishing, and prosperity, within a shared environment.

For the ancient Greeks, the purpose of *oikonomia* ("economics") was to serve human interests by helping humans pursue the goals of *euzen*, or living-well, and *eudaimonia*, or flourishing. *Eudaimonia* literally means "goodness indwelling within the spirit," and on a personal level implies a deep sense of being content in one's life. While the term is often translated as "happiness," the English word "flourishing" is more apropos, in that many ancients used it to imply a state of ideal wellbeing on both the personal and social levels. To flourish means more than simply succeeding in our careers and the fulfillment our socio-economic aspirations. Aristotle had argued that in order for personal flourishing to be attained one must live in a just society. If, on a social level, justice is fairness, and fairness implies equitable relations, we might venture to say that on an ecological level a just society enables its members to achieve both personal and communal well-being through the cultivation of symbiotic and fairly balanced relationships both with other humans as well as other living beings and the land they live in.

In promoting a more integral understanding of ecology, Pope Francis has endorsed Patriarch Bartholomew's concept of "ecological sin," which the Patriarch first expressed during a speech in Santa Barbara, California in 1997 stating, "*For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... For humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or des-*

*troying its wetlands... For humans to injure other humans with disease, for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... These are sins."* (9)

The Greek the word for "sin" is: *amartia*, which literally means to "miss the mark;" in this sense, to sin is to fall short of achieving our personal and communal goal of being good and striving to be virtuous, or the best we can be ethically; *amartia* is to fall short of truly flourishing and living the good life. Our contemporary global civilizational ethos has become permeated by an economic understanding of the human person as an isolated and competitively self-interested individual whose interests are best served through the ever-expanding consumption of material goods and amassment of wealth through commerce and competition with others. This ethos is propelling us to align all aspects of our life with the socio-economic aim of perpetual growth as a way to flourish, when in fact it is causing harm to the health, stability, and longevity of humanity and an array of other species and the ecosystems we all live within. This ethos is making us miss the mark of goodness and virtue and is actually detracting from humanity's ability to flourish.

Realizing this, Pope Francis has poignantly critiqued the prevailing notion that perpetual economic growth contributes to our actual flourishing (10). As the ecological economist Herman Daly (11), himself a Protestant Christian, has been arguing for decades: the earth is finite and is the actual living system in which all other socially-constructed systems developed by humanity actually operate. Our current economic system has omitted biospheric finitude from its theoretical calculation and has an inherent tendency to treat natural resources as an infinite supply of potential raw inputs into the economy. Although natural ecosystems are indeed regenerative, they are only naturally capable of regeneration at a particular rate, beyond which our use of them hinders or even terminates, their natural regenerative capacities. The core problem with our current global economic system is that it is designed for infinite material growth in a finite biosphere. Simply put: the flourishing and prosperity of such a system, and all who live within and abide by it, is logically untenable in the long-term.

While some have been shocked to hear Pope Francis, a religious leader, comment on economic matters, he is not alone. I believe such shock often comes about due to a misguided belief that religion and economics have nothing to do with another. Not only are numerous global religious leaders and interfaith religious organizations in agreement with Pope Francis' position, or he with theirs, if we look toward the history of the world's religious traditions we will discover that many of them possess ethical teachings that are directly concerned with economic issues. For instance, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all traditionally condemned and prohibited usury — or the charging of interest on mo-

nies loaned. However, in our contemporary era, the majority of people practicing or identifying with these faiths are not even aware that their sacred scriptures and foundational moral writings have condemned this practice. An exception to this are contemporary Muslims who engage in Islamic banking, a form of banking in which *riba* (interest) is still deemed *haram* (prohibited) and hence, is not practiced (12). Given the fact that our ecological crisis is so deeply wedded to the infinite growth model of economic 'development' in which interest plays a crucial role, especially in the financial sector, Christians might re-consider their contemporary neglect of usury and, by starting to take the sin of usury seriously, may even consider developing alternate forms of banking, as some Muslims have done. This could be a way for Christians and Muslims to forge a collaboration and foster a sense of solidarity as they mutually adopt the cause of combatting socio-economic inequities while enacting more ecologically sustainable modes of economic behavior.

When discussing the intersection of ecological and economic concerns, environmentalists, eco-theologians, and ecologically-oriented ethicists and social thinkers have all called attention to the need for global society to reform our modes of production and our consumption practices. Environmentalists of all stripes have long prompted the ecological benefits of local food production and consumption as a means of reducing carbon emissions and fostering agricultural practices which are attentive to the particularities of regional ecosystems rather than implementing standardized industrial forms of agriculture that often disregard sustainable and regenerative agricultural methods to the detriment of ecological and human health. In addition to ecological and health benefits, promoting forms of economic localism may also help empower regional communities by fostering local entrepreneurial endeavors as well as collaborations amongst local businesses, which would help prevent the extraction of wealth from smaller locales by transnational corporate conglomerates and contribute to the local retention of wealth creation. While these ideas have been promoted by ecological economists and social justice advocates, they may also find support in traditional religious principles and practices as well.

For example, there are forms of localism that we find in both the Catholic and Islamic traditions. The principle of subsidiarity found within Catholic social teaching maintains that local communities ought to be afforded the power and authority to manage their own affairs when they are capable of doing so, rather than have a centralized governing body attempt to manage the affairs of distant regions. Although distinct, Islamic ideas pertaining to the distribution of *zakat*, or charitable taxation, (which is one of the five pillars of Islam) also endorse a form of localism. While *zakat* has historically been a form of quasi-centralized taxation intended to serve the common good as well as philanthropic endeavors, part of the rules pertaining to the distribution of

these monies has been the idea that such monies ought to remain within the local communities from which it was taken as a means of increasing local solidarity and preventing exploitative extraction of wealth from a local community to the centralized governing bodies; the idea here is that when *zakat* monies were not used locally, transparency and accountability diminished and hence, the chances for corruption increased. While I am not suggesting the implementation of taxation practices from the classical Islamic period, what I am suggesting is that the ethical guidelines surrounding these practices represent deep concerns for socio-economic justice that may serve as a source of insight for our contemporary era. The deep concern for localism found within both the Catholic and Islamic traditions can serve as a means of promoting interfaith collaborations regarding issues of the nature of local economies and tax distribution and their impact on the health, well-being and long-term economic and ecological flourishing of regional communities.

Furthermore, in what might at first seem an unlikely source of economic insight, even within the Buddhist tradition we find ethical reflection on the nature of the types of work one performs. Without going into too much detail, the eight-fold path is to govern and guide a Buddhist's life, and one of the eight principles is that of: "right livelihood." Performing certain types of work, or engaging in certain types of professions, can be inherently antithetical to the Buddhist conception of the ethical life, which is primarily informed by the notions of *karuna* (compassion for all beings), *ahimsa* (avoid causing harm to sentient life), and *nirodha*, or the idea that we must attempt to overcome our materialistic desires if we are to free ourselves and others from anguish and suffering. Consequently, to hold professions that intentionally aim to manufacture desire for unnecessary items for the sole aim of creating profit while intentionally neglecting the harms that certain products and modes of production may cause to ecological and human health and well-being, would be to fail to maintain the principle of "right livelihood," thereby diverting one from the path toward enlightenment, or nirvana.

Reflecting on these social dimensions of Buddhism, in the 1970's the economist E.F. Schumacher had argued that a good economy ought to be designed in such a way as to provide all members of society with a sufficient degree of well-being and livelihoods that do not cause harm to others, and which promote service to the public good of the communities in which they live. Schumacher's Buddhist economics shares much in common with Catholic Social Teaching and many of the ideas he espoused in the 1970's foreshadow ideas expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*. For instance, Schumacher argued that work should not be conceived of solely as a means to acquire wealth but should also serve the common good, promote communal solidarity and help cultivate virtue. He critiqued excessive consumerism, promoted moderate consumption practices, argued for sustainably produced and locally sourced

products and endorsed renewable resources (13). These ideas are compatible with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, such as the principles of participation and association. Taken together, these principles argue that persons flourish when they are in fellowship and community with others and thereby ought to be able to freely associate with others and be afforded the ability to participate in social institutions necessary to sustain their social and economic lives. Schumacher's Buddhist economics is also compatible with, and even expresses, the principles of the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity and stewardship, that are found within Catholic social thought.

Despite the fact that some environmentalists, following Lynn White's publication of "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," (14) have accused the Judeo-Christian tradition for promoting the exploitation and domination of nature, many eco-theologians have called attention to the fact that the notion of "dominion" (15), found in Hebrew and Christian scriptures, is more accurately translated as "stewardship," an idea that serves as a foundational concept within Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (16). Eco-theologians from the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions have all stressed the notion that humans are called to be stewards of the earth and have discovered, through dialogue, that many of the world's other faith traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and various indigenous forms of spirituality, all share some vision of environmental stewardship which can unite them. We should note that the idea of stewardship involves tending to that over which one is a caretaker so that it may thrive and flourish. I mention this because the language of stewardship enables all people of goodwill to reflect upon the ways in which we are managing our earthly home and become cognizant of the inherent conceptual link between ecological and socio-economic systems.

As I have tried to briefly illustrate in this essay, there is much ethical wisdom that global civilization can learn from the world's religions and much that these faiths can learn from dialogue with one another – both about the beliefs, values and practices of other traditions, as well as rediscovering neglected elements of our own traditions as we seek to ameliorate the economic and ecological crises we face as a global society. Inter-faith dialogue and collaborative activism can help transform our social systems and bring the various peoples of the world into solidarity with one another through the common cause of making our global economic systems more socially just and ecologically sustainable.

Notes:

1. <http://www.nrpe.org>
2. <https://greenfaith.org>
3. <https://rfp.org/category/thematic-areas/environment/>
4. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". June 2015.
5. the Ecumenical Seat of the Eastern Orthodox Communion
6. Patriarch Bartholomew & Pope Francis. Joint Message on the World Day of Creation. (the Vatican & the Phanar: 1 Sept. 2017)
7. Pope Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
8. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". June 2015.
9. Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California. November 8, 1997
10. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". June 2015. p. 79
11. Daly, Herman. From Uneconomic Growth to a Steady-State Economy (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014) Herman Daly, "Economics for a Full World," Great Transition Initiative (June 2015)
12. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee. 2016. *The Concept of Riba' and Islamic Banking*. The Other Press (TOP), Malaysia
13. E. F. Schumacher. 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*. Blond & Briggs
14. White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155.3767 (1967): 1203-207. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>
15. the term "radah" in Hebrew
16. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". June 2015.

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**The Season of Creation** is a time to slow down and focus on what matters. During this special time each year, we repair and restore our relationships with each other and with all creation. **From September 1 to October 4**, Christians around the world celebrate the Season of Creation. Join us in this season of care. This year the theme is "The Jubilee of the Earth".



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