

# Ethics of Care in Laudato Si': A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Critique

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## Abstract

This article engages with the care ethics of Laudato Si' through the lens of postcolonial ecofeminism. Laudato Si' speaks of the family of creation where nature is both a nurturing mother and a vulnerable sister, reflecting patriarchal associations of women with nature, fragility, and the virtue of care. This indirectly undermines the need for men to engage in care/social reproduction work as well as the strengthening of women's agency. While this kin-centric ecology acknowledges the interdependence of creatures, it maintains the hierarchy of humans over nature and underlines this family's headship by an all-powerful Father. Laudato Si's family ecology and God language inadvertently reifies women–nature–care connection and reinforces the logic of male domination. This study recommends exploring gender inclusive images of the Trinity and the family of creation in mutual relations to foster care that promotes both the agency of women and nature.

## Keywords

Postcolonial ecofeminism, care ethics, Laudato Si'

In describing humans' responsibility toward creation, Laudato Si' employed the term "care" 20 times. In contrast, it mentioned stewardship only once and this is solely to qualify what "dominion" in the Bible means. Cardinal Turkson explained the preference for "care" as follows:

Good stewards take responsibility and fulfill their obligations to manage and to render an account. But one can be a good steward without feeling connected. If one cares, however, one

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is connected. To care is to allow oneself to be affected by another, so much so that one's path and priorities change.<sup>1</sup>

While *Laudato Si'* has been lauded for addressing the need to care for the environment especially in the context of the climate crisis, integrating analyses of environmental scientists, and incorporating the voice of regional conferences, it has been criticized for not recognizing decades of feminist scholarship in ecological discourse. This article examines the care ethics of *Laudato Si'* particularly through the lens of a particular strand of ecofeminism, that is, postcolonial ecofeminism.

## Postcolonial Ecofeminism

Postcolonial ecofeminism interrogates how colonial/neocolonial/metropolitan interests are represented in concepts of women and nature with the ultimate aim of “decolonization” in mind. Ecofeminist theories have so far not sufficiently addressed the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature through the double bind of being female and colonized.<sup>2</sup> In turn, not much have been written by postcolonial theorists on ecofeminism.

The term “postcolonial” is not being used here in the temporal sense, as if colonialism has ended. While many formerly colonized nations have attained formal independence, other forms of domination of a state by a superpower or by transnational corporations have emerged (e.g. neocolonialism/imperialism). The “post” in postcolonialism suggests the desire to go “beyond” the colonial in all its manifestations<sup>3</sup> in churches and in society. In a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, postcolonial criticism and ecofeminism combine to show that colonialism, neocolonialism, class-ism, caste-ism, racism, and other forms of domination are interlinked with both the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. All of these embed a logic of domination.

Furthermore, postcolonial theory, shaped by poststructuralism, would look at woman and nature not as homogeneous entities but as heterogeneous, and our concepts of these as socially constructed within a field of power relations. This would problematize the women–nature link that had been valorized by cultural feminists; women have multiple identities that come into play in their relationship with nature. Women and even men who grew up nearer to nature may by their social position have greater affinity and care for nature than those women and men who were raised in the urban jungle. Women from the global south have been associated more with nature and care work. Women's closeness to nature and ecological virtuousness cannot thereby be accepted as a given fact but must be interrogated in each concrete case.

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1. Turkson P (2016) Catholics, capitalism and climate: Cardinal Turkson interprets Pope Francis. Available at: <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/catholics-capitalism-and-climate-cardinal-turkson-interprets-pope-francis/>
  2. Kaur G (2012) Postcolonial ecofeminism in Indian novels in English. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2(5): 384–390.
  3. Keller C, Nausner M and Rivera M (2004) *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 7.

What a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would have in common with other ecofeminist theories is the attention to the link between women and nature, the critique of patriarchy, and its relation to other forms of oppression, including the exploitation of nature through dualistic and hierarchical thinking and the logic of domination. It shares with queer ecofeminism the critique of the identification of indigenous peoples with sexuality, femininity, and nature, and in its aim to “queer” or “blur” these dualisms.<sup>4</sup> It aligns with the cyborg feminism of feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway who employs the image of a cyborg—a hybrid of machine and organism—to destabilize not only male/female but also animal/human, nature/culture boundaries. In her theory of “artificialism,” Haraway posits that nature is likewise constructed, “but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans,”<sup>5</sup> thus underlining nature as a subject with its own agency.<sup>6</sup>

## Ethics of Care and the Environment

Ethics of care, on the contrary, was more focused on relationship between humans and was not initially concerned with other creatures and the environment. It developed in the mid-1980s through the works of feminist philosophers such as Carol Gilligan<sup>7</sup> and Nel Noddings.<sup>8</sup> For Noddings, caring is the “foundation of morality.” Caring is “ethically basic to humans” who are relational beings. Noddings also underline that feelings of care stem from the home, most probably in one’s experience of parental love.

In the 1990s, in their book *Beyond Animal Rights*, Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams introduced feminist caring ethics in the discussion of our relation with

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4. For a postcolonial perspective on the link between ecofeminism and queer liberation, see Gaard G (1997) *Toward a queer ecofeminism*. *Hypatia* 12(1): 114–137.
  5. Haraway D (1988) *Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective*. *Feminist Studies* 14(Fall): 592–594. See also Alaimo S (1994) *Cyborg and ecofeminist interventions: challenges for an environmental feminism*. *Feminist Studies* 20(1): 133–152.
  6. Along the same line and drawing from Alfred Whitehead’s process philosophy that considers each actual entity as a subject that brings into the process its “emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, consciousness, etc.,” ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague proposes a subject-subjects model in relating with nature. Whitehead A (1978) *Process and Reality Corrected Edition* (ed.) Griffin & Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 24; McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
  7. Gilligan C (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 5–23. Reacting to Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development that gives primacy to “rights and rules” and “an abstract idea of justice,” Gilligan identified a morality based on caring, responsibility, and relationships, more prevalent among women than men.
  8. Noddings N (1984) *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Both charged traditional moral approaches with male bias and asserted the “voice of care” as a legitimate alternative to the “justice perspective” of liberal human rights theories.

animals.<sup>9</sup> This approach “pays attention” not only to the abuse or suffering of an individual animal but also to the socio-political-economic structures that are at the root of this suffering.

In the past decades, a shift has occurred in care ethics from simply attending to vulnerable persons and animals to a broader global ethic concerned with the protection of ecosystems and the planet.<sup>10</sup> Others further blend ethics of care and postcolonial feminism especially as colored women or those from the two-thirds world have borne the burden of care work (household services) not only within their own families but also in the current global division of labor.<sup>11</sup> The 2018 International Labor Organization Report reveals that three-fourths of unpaid care work are performed by women.<sup>12</sup> Even if more men are now taking up unpaid care work in some countries, at the rate this is increasing, it would still take 210 years to close the gender gap.<sup>13</sup> As extension of care work at home, two-thirds of paid care jobs are likewise done by women, oftentimes migrants working with low pay under the informal economy. This is not only due to entrenched social expectation of men to be the breadwinner and women to be the caretakers in the family but also due to the lack of state support for these social reproductive roles/tasks.

## Care in God’s Family of Creation

The principles of care ethics are palpable in the texts of *Laudato Si’*. *Laudato Si’* grounds the need to care for all of creation and for the environment in our interconnectedness (no. 70) and interdependence (nos. 42, 229) as a family that shares a common home (232). St. Francis is proposed as a model of one who treats every creature as a sister, a kin, and thus “called to care for all that exist” (no. 11). Like him, we are invited to speak the “language of fraternity” that reminds us of our intimate unity with all that exists.

In relation to this, *Laudato Si’* calls out the “excessive anthropocentrism” or an “inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology” that leads to a “wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world” (no. 116), causing some to dismiss caring for or protecting nature as only for the “faint-hearted.”

The document also underlines how it is in the family that we learn how to care for others, the ecosystem, and all creatures (no. 213), but especially for the most vulnerable

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9. Donovan J and Adams C (eds) (1996) *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*. New York: Continuum; see also Donovan J and Adams C (eds) (2007) *Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press.
  10. Brîndușa P (2019) To be or not to be sustainable: the care ethics of the environment vs. the tragedy of the commons. Available at: <https://www.filodiritto.com/be-or-not-be-sustainable-care-ethics-environment-vs-tragedy-commons>
  11. Mooten N (2016) Toward a postcolonial ethic of care. Available at: [https://ethicsofcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Toward\\_a\\_Postcolonial\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Care.pdf](https://ethicsofcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Toward_a_Postcolonial_Ethics_of_Care.pdf)
  12. Addati L, Cattaneo U, Esquivel V, et al. (2018) *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*. Geneva: ILO.
  13. International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018) Women do 4 times more unpaid care work than men in Asia and the Pacific. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_633284/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang-en/index.htm)

of our brothers and sisters (no. 64) in creation. As in care ethics, *Laudato Si'* links caring to emotions—feelings of compassion (no. 210) and tenderness (no. 220).

It notes that the need to care for creation stems from the fact of our being human “since we were made for love” and we are part of this environment that needs care (no. 64). Beyond this though, the duty to care is rooted in our faith convictions, that nature has been entrusted by God for human care (no. 78) or that we are “instruments of God for the care of creation” (no. 14).

*Laudato Si'* points out that as a virtue, “genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable” from other virtues such as “fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (no. 70). From a postcolonial perspective, the document stresses that such “care for the world must also be flexible and dynamic” (no. 144) and need not be always imported from the outside, but must develop from within the local culture. It expresses special concern for indigenous communities, for whom land is a gift from God and a sacred site of burial for their ancestors, and integrally linked to their identity and values. “When they remain on the land, they themselves care for it best” (no. 146). They are thus main dialogue partners related to mega-projects that would affect their homelands.

## **Virtuousness and Ecological Vulnerability: Absence and Presence**

*Laudato Si'* employs the language of care minus its gender component, even if the theory itself was largely developed by women and drawn from the experiences of women. It speaks of our common home (nos. 17, 53, 61, 164), a place associated with women but does not critique the patriarchal home/family that is normative in many societies, and that as a result most care work have been relegated to women.

It is notable that though the document quoted a phrase from the Philippine pastoral letter “What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” on the bleaching of corals, it ignored the ecofeminist part of the letter, albeit cultural feminist part that links care for creation to the parents, especially the mother’s care for her children, and women’s ecological citizenship:

Parents share their life with their children. They protect them and care for them and are particularly solicitous when any member of the family is sick. This is especially true of mothers; they are the heartbeat of the family, working quietly in the home to create an atmosphere where everyone is accepted and loved. No sacrifice is too demanding when it comes to caring for a sick member of the family. The values we see in our families of patient toil, concern for all and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of others are the very values which we must now transfer to the wider sphere in our efforts to conserve, heal and love our land. It is not a mere coincidence that women have been at the forefront of the ecological movement in many countries. The tree planting program of the Chipko in India, popularly known as the “hug a tree” movement and the Greenbelt movement in Kenya spring to mind.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (1988) What is happening to our beautiful land? A pastoral letter on ecology. Available at: <http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1980s/1988-ecology.html>

On a metaphorical-symbolic level, however, Laudato Si' likened the earth to a "beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us," "sustains and governs us and produces various fruits . . ." (no. 1), thus depicting the "female earth" as caring for creation. But this earth, a "sister (no. 53) with whom we share our life," has also been violated by humans.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. (no. 2)

Laudato Si' thus represents nature both as a mother that cares and nourishes and a vulnerable sister that is exploited. This woman–nature connection in terms of both virtuousness and vulnerability in the document, however, has not been unpacked.

Indeed, in our societies, women like nature are generally more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change and ecological destruction. As the ones generally in charge of social reproduction defined as the education and sustenance or care of community members,<sup>15</sup> women feel more the brunt of environmental degradation. However, the vulnerability of particular groups is correlated to the degree of exposure to risk, sensitivity to effect of climate change, and the adaptive capacity.<sup>16</sup> The capacity to adapt in turn depends on "wealth, technology, education, information, skills, infrastructure, access to resources, and management capabilities."<sup>17</sup> Due to gender inequalities especially in developing countries, women tend to have less access to these. These gaps can thereby restrict their capacity to adapt and thus expose them to greater risk.

In a study of 141 countries between 1981 and 2002, women were also more likely than men to die in natural disasters, with mortality varying depending on socioeconomic status.<sup>18</sup> There can be exceptions as in the Philippines where in a coastal community hit by Typhoon Haiyan, one of two strongest tropical cyclones at landfall, there were more men (66%) than women (34%) who died. This is because in their gender division of labor, it is the task of men to stay behind to watch over their domestic belongings and their livestock when there are strong typhoons while the women and children go to evacuation centers. This is premised on the belief that the men are physically stronger and will be able to weather the typhoon better in case it really becomes dangerous.

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15. Katz C (2008) Bad elements: Katrina and the scoured landscape of social reproduction. *Gender Place and Culture* 15(1): 15–29. Social reproduction is mostly performed by women. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports, women do 75% of unpaid care work and 67% of paid care work. International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018) *Care Work and Care Jobs: For the Future of Decent Work*. Geneva: ILO, 525.
  16. Adger WN, Arnell N and Tompkins E (2005) Successful adaptation to climate change across scales. *Global Environmental Change* 5(2): 77–86.
  17. Masika R (2002) Editorial. In: Masika R (ed.) *Gender, Development, and Climate Change*. Oxford: Oxfam, 4.
  18. Neumayer E and Plümper T (2007) The gendered nature of natural disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97(3): 551–566.

Women oftentimes are also responsible for caring for the sick especially after natural disasters. The rise in climate-related natural disasters increases their care burden and reduces their participation in income-generating activities.<sup>19</sup> Again, depending on difference in culture, this may not always be the case. In the Philippines, however, where there exist less restriction to women's mobility, increase in natural disasters can also lead to women to venture to migrate to the cities to look for work, where oftentimes they end up in jobs that are extensions of household work. Because of their destitute situation, young girls fall prey to prostitution while others get into forced labor.

In terms of care for the environment or ecological virtuousness, some studies show women as taking more seriously ecological and climate change problems.<sup>20</sup> This is not innate in women but linked to factors such as their work context and dependence on nature, that is, it is women who most of the time do the care work and have thus, in certain contexts, developed more this sensibility. In the case of 30 coastal villages within three Philippine provinces (Palawan, Occidental Mindoro, and Batangas), Kathryn Graziano found that since the men were the ones who go out to the sea to fish, they felt more connection with nature than the women, and were "equally inclined to conservation attitudes as men."<sup>21</sup>

Our discourse, whether metaphorical or not, must go beyond the women as more vulnerable and more virtuous in relation to the environment. While *Laudato Si'* did not speak of women as more vulnerable and more ecologically virtuous, its association of women with vulnerable nature on one hand and caring earth on the other, in the absence of nuancing, reinforces the woman–nature<sup>22</sup> and woman as vulnerable-caring connection.

If care work for the vulnerable and for creation is an ecological virtue, it must be shared by all. For this to truly happen, care work must first be problematized from the perspective of gender: Who does the care work (race, gender, ethnicity)? Why? For whose interests? What structures reinforce this? Without a critique of patriarchy that thrives on a complementary view of gender roles as fixed, with men as the primary

19. Demetriades J and Esplen E (2008) The gender dimensions of poverty and climate change adaptation. *IDS Bulletin* 39(4): 24–31.

20. Bord R and O'Connor R (1997) The gender gap in environmental attitudes: the case of perceived vulnerability to risk. *Social Science Quarterly* 78(4): 830–840.

21. Graziano K (2014) *Wading past assumptions: gender dimensions of climate change adaptations in coastal communities in the Philippines*. MA Thesis, University of Washington, 3. Available at: <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/26770?show=full>. On the need to deconstruct the vulnerability and virtuousness of women in relation to the environment, see also Arora-Jonsson S (2011) Virtue and vulnerability: discourses on women, gender, and climate change. *Global Environmental Change* 21(2): 744–751.

22. Anne Clifford also critiques the use of the mother-earth metaphor that suggests the endless bounty of nature which is the reverse of what Pope Francis intends, that is, to call our attention to the extinction of species (LS 44) due to the primacy being given to short-term profit (LS 36). She also notes that the metaphor suffers from its history of use in the context of Greek dualism where nature is feminine while spirit or rationality is masculine. Castillo D (2017) Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* on care for our common home: an ecofeminist response. *CTSA Proceedings* 72: 33, 35.

breadwinners and women as the primary caretakers, our discourse will simply maintain the current division of care labor in the family and in society.

That *Laudato Si'* maintains a fixed complementary view of women and men is apparent in no. 155 when it speaks of valuing femininity and masculinity as part of care for biodiversity:

Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek "to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it."<sup>23</sup>

To understand what the Pope means by femininity or masculinity, it is good to look back at what he said in *Amoris Laetitia*:<sup>24</sup>

For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities—*motherhood* in particular—also grant duties, because womanhood also entails a specific mission in the world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all. (AL173; italics mine)

In continuity with the teachings of John Paul II, Pope Francis links the feminine genius to motherhood or care of children. Although men can share in the task of caring for children, without diminishing their masculinity, it is still for him the primary responsibility of women.

While childcare is an important task that should not be neglected, as with the care of creation, it must be equally shared by both men and women. Furthermore, ecofeminists who question the dualist perspective on maleness and femaleness, femininity and masculinity, nature and culture do not necessarily wish to abolish these distinctions but only to destabilize or "queer" the distinctions.

Some indigenous groups in the Philippines refer to the land that nourishes not just as mother but as both mother and father.<sup>25</sup> This moves beyond the women–nature/care

23. Pope Francis (2015) *The Family—10. Male and Female (I)*. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150415\\_udienza-generale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150415_udienza-generale.html). Taken from the Pope's message delivered to a general audience at the St. Peter's Square, what is being criticized as "gender theory" that does "cancel out sexual difference" is a strawman, for gender theory examines precisely how notions of femininity and masculinity differ based on cultural context, community, and field of study.

24. Pope Francis (2016) *Amoris Laetitia, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family*. Available at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf)

25. For 14 indigenous groups of Mindanao (Subanon, Mamanwa, Bukidnon, Higaonon, Mansaka, Mandaya, Ata, Dibabawon, B'laan, Manobo, Bagobo, T'bolis, Ubo, and Tiruray), the land which is a source of life and everything they need is both their father and mother. See Gaspar



binary in the metaphorical reference to the earth. Of course, a change in our use of metaphors will not necessarily lead to a transformation in the social order; the gender division of care work itself must be recast. But the change in language is a reminder to expand our vision and imagination of the world and what is possible.

## Biological Reproductive Work and Care of Creation

That women are tasked to be the primary caretakers in the family has been linked to their biological role in reproduction. Women bear the responsibility to reproduce as well as expected by social norms to control reproduction if needed. The issue of biological reproduction and the environmental crisis remains a hotly contested issue.

Environmental scientists of the Stockholm Resilience Centre led by John Rockström and Will Steffen identified nine planetary boundaries that form a safe space within which human development, innovation, and economic growth can take place.<sup>26</sup> Rockström et al. argue that the goal of sustainable development should be integrated within the parameters of these planetary boundaries. To achieve sustainable development, they proposed six major structural transformations,<sup>27</sup> one of which is population transformation through voluntary fertility reduction.

The list of structural transformations do not deny the need for a change in lifestyle enabled by various structures, as well as the promotion of equality through good governance, but it also underlines the need for population transformation through voluntary

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K (2000) *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Davao, Philippines: Ateneo Forum for Research in Mindanao, 107. These cultures did not confine the metaphorical task of nourishing and care only to the woman but to both father and mother.

26. The nine planetary boundaries consist of the following: climate change, novel entities (chemical pollution, radioactive, and nanomaterials), ozone depletion, aerosol loading, ocean acidification, freshwater use, land system change, biogeochemical flows, and biosphere integrity. The boundaries identify the level at which it remains safe to use non-renewable fuel resources, the living biosphere, as well as to release human and chemical wastes. Rockström J, Steffen W, Noone K, et al. (2009) Planetary boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society* 14(2): 32. Four of the boundaries have already been transgressed: climate change, land use change, integrity of the biosphere, and biogeochemical flows (interference with nitrogen and phosphorous cycles) through intensive farming. Rockström J (2015) Bounding the planetary future: why we need a great transition. Available at: <https://www.greattransition.org/publication/bounding-the-planetary-future-why-we-need-a-great-transition>
27. The six major structural transformations are as follows: (1) shift to a low-carbon economy, (2) intensive agro-ecological food production, (3) urban resource use efficiency and resiliency, (4) population transformation through voluntary fertility reduction, (5) management of biodiversity, and (6) and transformation in private and public governance. Rockström J and Sachs J with Öhman M and Schmidt-Traub G (2013) Sustainable development and planetary boundaries: background research paper submitted to the high level panel on the post-2015 development agenda. Available at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/sustainable-development-and-planetary-boundaries.pdf>. The authors view the structural transformations as simply a part of a post-2015 agenda since these do not sufficiently address yet issues on inequality, gender, health, and so on.

fertility reduction. This will be attained through the education of women. While population growth rate worldwide has gone down, this started to occur when global population is already at a high level, and it would take till the mid-century for the absolute number of people globally to decrease. The projections of Rockström and company have shown that even change in lifestyles together with improved efficiency in the use of resources will barely be sufficient to keep development within the planetary boundaries<sup>28</sup> and to attain sustainable development. Increase in population growth leads to an increase in food demand that puts greater strain on the environment.

Critics of population regulation from the global south see the huge funds of the United Nations to regulate population as a form of neocolonialism.<sup>29</sup> They label those who address population issue as “anti-poor,” “anti-developing country,” or even “antihuman.” Indeed, population control should not be a condition for the granting of aid. Yet, not addressing the issue of population growth ignores the planetary boundaries that may be transgressed in order to feed the growing population, and the question of survival and livelihood especially of the most vulnerable.<sup>30</sup>

While receptive to the works of environmental scientists in general, Laudato Si’ has chosen to take a blind eye to the issue of fertility regulation as a crucial factor among others in the care of creation. This seems to go deeper than just trying to avoid further discussion on the use of artificial contraception, and even abortion, according to Mark Graham.

This disavowal [of the population problem] is based on his extreme skepticism concerning a biased elitist narrative, highly popular and influential in international governmental and policy circles, which blames the poor for the explosion of population growth in certain regions. In Francis’s mind, this is simply a way for the economic elite to deflect attention away from their rapacious consumptive habits . . .<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the Pope expressed concern about the corresponding rise in consumption that may result from demographic growth in certain regions (no. 50). While indeed the consumerism of the rich needs to be addressed, studies in the Philippines also reveal a positive correlation between family size and poverty. The priest-sociologist John Carroll notes the indications that it is harder for families to get out of poverty, the bigger the family. Expenses on education and health per family member decrease as the size of the family increases.<sup>32</sup> An integral ecology has to be sensitive as well to this concern on the local level.

28. Gerst M, Raskin P and Rockström J (2014) Contours of a resilient global future. *Sustainability* 6(1): 123–135. Available at: [http://greattransition.org/archives/other/Gerst\\_Raskin\\_Rockstrom\\_Contours\\_of\\_a\\_Resilient\\_Global\\_Future.pdf](http://greattransition.org/archives/other/Gerst_Raskin_Rockstrom_Contours_of_a_Resilient_Global_Future.pdf)

29. Ekeocha O (2019) Neo-colonialism and reproductive health. *Church Life Journal*. Available at: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/neo-colonialism-and-reproductive-health/>

30. Kopnina H and Washington H (2016) Discussing why population growth is still ignored or denied. *Chinese Journal of Population Resources and Environment* 14(2): 133–143.

31. Graham M (2017) Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’: a critical response. *Minding Nature* 10(2): 60.

32. Carroll J (2007) Addressing demographic realities: a complementary perspective. In: Carroll J, et al., *A Balancing Act: Social and Catholic Perspectives on Population and Development*. 2nd ed. Quezon City, Philippines: JJICSI and the Philippine Center for Population Development, 29.

Reproduction is likewise not just a private affair but a social responsibility and is linked to development. Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* 37 notes, "It is true that too frequently an accelerated demographic increase adds its own difficulties to the problem of development; the size of the population increases more rapidly than available resources . . ." John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 25 affirms,

One cannot deny the existence, especially in the Southern Hemisphere, of a demographic problem which creates difficulties for development. One must immediately add that in the Northern Hemisphere, the nature of this problem is reversed: Here the cause for concern is the drop of birthrate.

Trying to avoid the issue altogether, Pope Francis did not even elaborate on approaches to fertility regulation that are in line with official Church teachings such as responsible parenthood, educating girls in the two-thirds world, and disseminating information about natural family planning.<sup>33</sup>

Care for the family of creation through fertility regulation is a responsibility of both husband and wife, the state, and the global community. The woman here should not remain the vulnerable silent other—the object of debate of those who wish to regulate her fertility and those who wish to deprive her of this choice. Education can give her the voice and agency that can transform her situation from vulnerability to virtuousness in her care for the planet.

## From a Hierarchy in God's Family of Creation to a Sacred Family in Mutual Relation

Finally, not everyone is equal in Laudato Si's family of creation. Even as it recognizes the intrinsic dignity/value of the world and of other beings (nos. 115, 118, 140), it sees the latter as "lesser beings" (no. 118) and maintains the traditional church teaching on the superiority of humans over other creatures: "We do not understand our *superiority* as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith" (no. 220; italics mine) While the earth our mother nourishes us, we humans remain superior because of our rational capacities.

Along the same line, God's family of creation in Laudato Si' is headed by an all-powerful Father:

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable . . . The best way to put men and women in their place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is once again to put forward the figure of a Father, who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (no. 75)

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33. Graham M (2017) Pope Francis' Laudato Si, 57–64.

Surprisingly, it asserts that only the dominion of a Father can put an end to the domination of humans over creation.<sup>34</sup> Creation when imaged as a community need not, however, be headed by an all-powerful Father. From a postcolonial, in particular, Southeast Asian perspective, a sign of power is the ability to maintain opposites in balance. In Java, Indonesia, this is traditionally symbolized “by the juxtaposition in the ardhnari image of male and female characteristics (i.e. the left side of the statue is physiologically female and the right side male).”<sup>35</sup> One autochthonous nationalist religious group in the Philippines,<sup>36</sup> Ciudad Mistica formed around the turn of the twentieth century, that has blended Christian symbols and beliefs with indigenous religion, view the Trinity as a Sacred Family composed of God as both Mother and Father, the Son incarnated as man/woman, and the Holy Spirit who is also called by a female title.<sup>37</sup>

This way of understanding the Trinity can be understood within the Southeast Asian concept of power in the balance of opposites, of both maleness and femaleness. This is also rooted in Filipin@ indigenous religion’s belief in the Motherhood of God and women’s spiritual leadership.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, motherhood in Mistica is based not on parturition or physical motherhood, nor associated solely with traditional “feminine” qualities as nurturing, compassion, and tenderness, but on her being the font of all creation, salvation, and of holy wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

While some of Ciudad Mistica’s beliefs are heretical from the perspective of Christianity, it can lead us to re-examine the Judaeo-Christian tradition where likewise a female image of God, Sophia in the Wisdom literature, existed side-by-side the male

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34. Emily Reimer-Barry points out how the Father God-language of Laudato Si even as it adopts patriarchy which literally means the “rule of the father” at the same time subverts it by stressing the Father’s “tenderness, mercy, and compassion” (no. 77). It also speaks of Joseph’s tenderness “which is not a mark of the weak but of those who are genuinely strong, fully aware of reality and ready to love and serve in humility.” Reimer-Barry E (2015) On naming god: gendered god-talk in Laudato Si’. Available at: <https://catholicmoraltheology.com/on-naming-god-gendered-god-talk-in-laudato-si/>
  35. Anderson B (1972) The idea of power in Javanese culture. In: Holt C (ed.) with the assistance of Anderson B and Siegel J *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University, 14.
  36. Ciudad Mistica is based in Mount Banahaw that is home to more than 80 home-grown religious–nationalist movements.
  37. *Bathala* is Tagalog word for God and is male in gender, while *Bathaluman* is female in gender. In Ciudad Mistica, the Holy Spirit and God the Mother are referred to as *Bathalumang Banal na Diwa* and *Bathalumang Ina*, respectively. Ligo A (2006) Searching for Babaylan in Ciudad Mistica de Dios. In: Mangahas F and Llaguno J (eds) *Centennial Crossings*. Quezon City, Philippines: C&E Publ.
  38. See Alfred Whitehead’s quantitative study showing a significant correlation between a masculine image of God and traditional gender ideology. Whitehead A (2012) Gender ideology and religion: does a masculine image of god matter? *Review of Religious Research* 54(2): 139–156. Ciudad Mistica’s female imaging of God translates to and/or is supported by women’s religious leadership. It is a woman-led church that incorporates leadership for both women and men in the sanctifying, governing, and teaching functions.
  39. Brazil A (2018) Female image of God and women’s leadership in Ciudad Mistica de Dios. *Asian Christianities, Concilium* 1: 83–91.

image Yahweh. And though Sophia has been represented in various ways in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Wisdom 7:7-8:2, 10-11, she is clearly the source of all being, savior, and spirit of wisdom. She is not just a creature of God but equal to God. In her book, *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson elaborated on female images of the Trinity—Spirit Sophia, Jesus Sophia, and Mother-Sophia.<sup>40</sup>

In the Southeast Asian perspective, the integration of gender within the Trinity poses no problem to its structure, since a single being can balance both maleness and femaleness.<sup>41</sup> Maleness and femaleness are likewise not linked to stereotypical masculine and feminine qualities, respectively. The distinction between maleness and femaleness in the ardhanari gets blurred as both exist in a single being.

The power that emanates from the Trinity should not be construed though in the traditional Southeast Asian perspective where power is like a substance that can be accumulated in an individual or object (e.g. talisman).<sup>42</sup> Rather as Michel Foucault notes, power is a “relation of force”; it circulates in the form of a chain and is never possessed as a commodity.<sup>43</sup> Even if some individuals or groups may hold greater influence, power flows depending on negotiations, interrelations, and competitions between parties, discourses, and institutions.

Sacred power in the Trinity is also a “relation of force”—a power that enables caring in a mutuality of relations. It is not a power that is concentrated on the almighty Father but lies rather in the interconnectedness of the Three persons who though diverse are equal.

This power of the Trinity is present in creation whenever power is utilized so we can choose to care in a mutually enriching way. Feminists have introduced the concept of mutuality to refer to a relationship that is empowering rather than patronizing the vulnerability of others. Mutuality “is a relational process in which all persons or parties are empowered thereby experiencing themselves as able to survive, affect others creatively and make a constructive difference in the world around them.” It abandons “racist, sexist, classist, cultural, and anthropocentric assumptions of the superiority of whites over blacks, males over females, managers over workers, humans over animals and plants.”<sup>44</sup> The Trinity in mutual relations is a model for the community of creation as a family where both the agency of women and nature are recognized.

40. Johnson E (1992) *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad.

41. See also Michael Rae’s argumentation in favor of speaking of each person of the Trinity in gendered terms: “[i]f every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, men and women as such would not be equally created in the image of God—men would be greater image-bearers than women.” Rae M (2016) Gender as a divine attribute. *Religious Studies* 52(1): 97–115.

42. Anderson B (1972) The idea of power in Javanese culture. In: Holt C, Anderson B, and Siegel J (eds) *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1–70.

43. Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 98.

44. Heyward C (1996) Mutuality. In: Isherwood L and McEwan D (eds) *A–Z of Feminist Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 155.

## Conclusion

Laudato Si' speaks of the family of creation where nature is both a nurturing mother and a vulnerable sister—a projection, albeit unconscious, of the patriarchal association of women with both care and fragility, undermining the need for men to engage in care/social reproduction work as well as the fostering of women's agency. Furthermore, this family of creation, which maintains the hierarchy of humans over other creation even as it recognizes the interdependence of all creatures, is headed by an all-powerful Father. From a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, a gender inclusive image of the Trinity and the family of creation in mutual relations may be a more fruitful way to foster care as a virtue.

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