

(UNIT 5) Francis of Assisi and 'Creation Mysticism'

Due to the furore generated by his claim that Christianity 'bears a huge burden of guilt' for the ecological crisis, there is one aspect of Lynn White's thesis that has gone largely unnoticed, namely, that White does not advocate abandoning the Judeo-Christian tradition wholesale. On the contrary, the historian concludes that 'since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious'. White goes on to proffer the 'alternative Christian view of nature' embodied in the life of Francis of Assisi as that remedy. This unit, then, explores the life and legacy of this most popular saint (dubbed a 'patron saint for ecologists' by White and, in fact, later canonized as such by Pope John Paul II), examining the contribution of his brand of 'creation mysticism' to a contemporary discussion of green issues.

Essential Reading

There is an astounding volume of literature available on Francis of Assisi, a tendency of which has been to sentimentalize, and thereby trivialize, the saint's life story. As a result, detailed analyses of Francis' theological vision, and the extent to which it can contribute positively to contemporary discussion of environmental concerns, are few and far between. Nevertheless, there are a handful of authors who have sought to approach the ecological legacy of this famed 'nature mystic' from a deeper, more critical perspective. It is these authors who dominate the reading for this unit.

Your first port of call should be the essay by Peter Hooper ('**St Francis and Ecology**' – PDF file on Moodle). This short chapter is far from comprehensive but it constitutes a useful introduction to the biography of the saint and its relationship to ecology. An altogether more detailed treatment of the topic is provided by Jan Boersema ('**Why Is Francis of Assisi the Patron Saint of Ecologists?**' – PDF file on Moodle) who, in analysing the writings and works traditionally ascribed to the saint, is less than enthusiastic about White's endorsement of Francis as a 'patron saint for ecologists'.

Boersema's rather negative assessment of Francis' theology contrasts heavily with the sympathetic view expressed by Santmire and Bauckham. In ch. 6 of his book, ***The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*** (PDF file on Moodle), Paul Santmire denies that Francis represents a perfect or fully-developed vision of a responsible eco-theology but insists, nonetheless, that the saint's insights and emphases 'commend themselves to us today, probably more than the contributions of any other single individual who stands within the context of the classical theological tradition'. Richard Bauckham, meanwhile, chides White for misrepresenting Francis but highlights the sense of 'common creatureliness' or mutuality that pervades the saint's theology (***Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology, ch. 2*** – PDF file on Moodle). Bauckham also compares Francis' 'creation mysticism' with that of contemporary Catholic theologian

Matthew Fox, identifying the former's as more authentically Christian (**Living with Other Creatures, ch. 9** – PDF file on Moodle).

The 'essential reading' for this unit concludes with an essay by the Franciscan friar Keith Douglass Warner (**'The Moral Significance of Creation in the Franciscan Theological Tradition: Implications for Contemporary Catholics and Public Policy'** – PDF file on Moodle). Warner's essay examines the ways in which the theological and moral implications of Francis' concern for creation were developed by those within the Franciscan intellectual tradition, particularly by St Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus. Warner concludes by attempting to demonstrate how the wisdom of the Franciscan tradition can be brought to bear on contemporary environmental issues.

Suggested Further Reading

Roger Sorrell's book, ***St Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment***, offers the most comprehensive analysis of the saint's attitude towards nature and remains the definitive study on the topic. The book can be accessed via the University's online catalogue (link on Moodle) and is certainly worth dipping into should you have the opportunity. Also on Moodle is a link to a lecture by Dawn Northwehr (**'The Relevance of the Franciscan Tradition – Franciscan Theology of the Environment'**). This lecture forms a handy introduction to the work of Northwehr, an academic who has published widely on the relationship between the Franciscan tradition and ecology.

For more on Catholic perspectives on the environment, you might like to read the article by John Hart in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (**'Catholicism'** – link on Moodle). Also of interest is the recent encyclical of Pope Francis on the subject of creation care (**'Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home'** – PDF file on Moodle). That the figure of St Francis is a particular source of inspiration for the current Pope is reflected in the fact that the title of this landmark encyclical has been borrowed from the saint's *Canticle of the Creatures* (as well as in the choice of papal name!). The encyclical calls Francis 'the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically' (see paragraphs 10-12).