

Rarely but significantly, this shared creatureliness is perceived as the common worship of God. The Saxon saint Benno of Meissen (d. 1106) was disturbed in his contemplation by the loud croaking of a frog, and so he commanded it to be silent. But he then remembered the words of the *Benedicite*, which, among its exhortations to all creatures to worship God, includes: 'bless the Lord you whales and all that swim in the waters' (Daniel 3:79). Reflecting that God might prefer the singing of the frogs to his own prayer, he commanded the frogs to continue praising God in their own way.⁸⁵

Francis of Assisi as Representative of the Alternative Tradition

Lynn White proposed Francis of Assisi as 'a patron saint for ecologists'.⁸⁶ The proposal is entirely appropriate. No other figure in Christian history so clearly, vividly and attractively embodies a sense of the world, including humanity, as a community of God's creatures, mutually interdependent, existing for the praise of their Creator, or has so effectively inspired in Christians an attitude of appreciation, gratitude, respect and love for all God's creatures.⁸⁷ However, when White portrays Francis as a completely exceptional figure in Christian history, he both misrepresents Francis's own views and neglects the extent to which they are anticipated in the tradition of stories of saints and nature. On the one hand, it is not true that 'Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures' or that he 'tried to substitute the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation'.⁸⁸ Francis did not reject the notion of human dominion over the rest of creation, but interpreted it in the way that we have seen that the tra-

⁸⁵ Waddell, *Beasts*, pp. 71–2; Bell, *Wholly Animals*, pp. 25–6. (See also Chapter 7 in this volume.) Note also the quotation from the *Benedicite* in the *Voyage of St Brendan*, discussed by Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 24–5.

⁸⁶ White, 'Historical Roots', p. 30.

⁸⁷ The definitive study is now Sorrell, *St. Francis*; but see also Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1973); Eloi Leclerc, *Le Chant des Sources* (3rd edn; Paris: Editions Franciscaines, 1975).

⁸⁸ White, 'Historical Roots', pp. 28, 29. Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. 34, who speaks of 'the cosmic democracy', comes rather close to this mistake, though his insights into Francis's confraternity with all creatures are very valuable.

dition of stories of saints and nature interpreted it. On the other hand, White misrepresents the latter tradition when he says that the legends of the saints (referring especially to the Irish saints) do not provide a precedent for the stories about Francis, because they told of the saints' dealings with animals only in order 'to show their human dominance over creatures'.⁸⁹ White cannot have read many of the legends of the Irish saints if he has not noticed how much more striking are the saints' delight in the companionship of animals and their loving care for animals. This is not to say that there are not relatively new aspects and emphases in Francis's teaching and behaviour, but the novelty emerges from his continuity with the tradition in which he stood.⁹⁰ Francis is the climax of a tradition reaching back to the desert fathers. He transcends it only through deep dependence on it.

Many of the stories of Francis's relationships with animals and other creatures continue the theme of the restoration of the paradisaical relationship of humans to the rest of creation,⁹¹ and they portray this relationship in much the same ways as the tradition of the stories of the saints had done. Francis frequently acts with authority to command the animals,⁹² illustrating Bonaventura's conclusion that 'Francis had power not only over men, but also over the fishes of the sea, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field'.⁹³ The fierce wolf that was terrorizing the town of Gubbio was tamed and became friendly under Francis's influence.⁹⁴ Animals serve Francis, like the falcon, which during his residence in his hermitage at La Verna used

⁸⁹ White, 'Historical Roots', p. 29.

⁹⁰ Even Sorrell, who carefully establishes Francis's continuity with the tradition before attempting to specify the really novel elements in his life and message (see the summary: *St. Francis*, pp. 138–9), perhaps fails to show sufficiently how the relatively novel elements develop out of the traditional. Bratton, 'Oaks', pp. 17–20, helpfully compares and contrasts Francis with the desert fathers and the Celtic saints.

⁹¹ According to Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* 8.1, Francis returned 'to the state of primeval innocence by restoring man's harmony with the whole of creation' (translation in Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983], p. 688). Translations from Francis's works and the early biographies are taken from Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short, eds, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1: *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999) when the texts are included in this volume, in other cases from Habig, *St. Francis*.

⁹² Examples listed in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 43.

⁹³ Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 1880.

⁹⁴ Fioretti 1.21 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 1348–51).

to wake him in time for matins, but showed such consideration for the saint that when Francis was tired or ill it would delay waking him until dawn.⁹⁵ Like many of the stories in the earlier tradition, this one emphasizes the affectionate friendship between the saint and the bird. The creatures respect Francis's authority, but they do so lovingly and willingly, as friends rather than slaves.

Many stories show Francis's care for animals in relatively traditional ways. Like other saints, he fed and protected his fellow-creatures. He wanted Christmas Day, a festival of special importance to Francis, to be honoured by the provision of abundant food for birds and more than the usual amount of food for domestic animals.⁹⁶ He saw to it that bees were provided with honey or wine lest they die of cold in the winter.⁹⁷ Though he is not said to have saved animals from hunters, several stories portray him saving animals from danger or harm, freeing animals that had been caught and brought to him, returning fish to the water, even removing worms from the road lest they be trampled.⁹⁸ (But it should be noted that Francis was not a vegetarian, and so cannot have thought the catching of fish and trapping of animals was always wrong.) Such stories are both continuous with the tradition and sufficiently distinctive of Francis to convince us that we are not dealing with a literary topos, but with genuine reminiscences of Francis's concern for creatures, which stemmed from his eremitical experience of living closely with wild nature, as many hermits had before him. Like some of the stories in the earlier tradition, those about Francis frequently emphasize the reciprocity of his relationships with animals: they are tame and friendly as he is gentle and concerned. The friendly and non-violent harmony of paradise is restored.

Francis is reported as saying that 'every creature says and proclaims: "God has created me for you, O man!"' Although this reflects the medieval theological commonplace that the rest of the material creation was made for humanity, the context should be noted. Francis was telling the brother gardener not to plant vegetables everywhere, but to reserve part of the garden for plants whose scent and flowers 'might invite all men who looked at them to praise God'.⁹⁹ Thus

⁹⁵ Celano, *Vita Secunda* 168 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 497-8).

⁹⁶ Celano, *Vita Secunda* 200 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 522).

⁹⁷ Celano, *Vita Prima* 80 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 296; Armstrong, R. J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 250).

⁹⁸ Listed in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 44.

⁹⁹ *Legenda Peruginia* 51 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 1029).

Francis refuses to limit the value of the rest of creation for humanity to its practical usefulness but sees it as consisting also in its assisting humanity's praise of God. But Francis's principle (to be expressed most fully and beautifully at the end of his life in the *Canticle of Brother Sun*) was that because the 'creatures minister to our needs every day', and 'without them we could not live', therefore we should appreciate them and praise God for them.¹⁰⁰ Thus the theme of human dominion is understood theocentrically rather than anthropocentrically. The creatures' service of humanity is properly received only as cause for praise and thankfulness to God. Therefore the human dominion over the creatures becomes for Francis primarily a matter of dependence on the creatures, with whom humanity shares a common dependence on the Creator. The creatures on whose service we depend are not to be exploited, but to be treated with brotherly/sisterly respect and consideration.

This means that in Francis the sense in which humanity has been given a superior status in creation is only to be understood in relationship to his overwhelming sense of the common creatureliness which makes all creatures his 'sisters' and 'brothers'.¹⁰¹ This usage seems to be distinctive of Francis. The Celtic saints had called the animals who befriended them their brothers in the monastic sense. Francis regards all the creatures (not only animals, but also fire and water, sun and moon, and so on) as brothers and sisters, because they are fellow-creatures and fellow-members of the family of those who serve God. The terms denote affection and especially affinity. Thus, while there is a residual element of hierarchy in the relationship (humans and other creatures are not regarded as equal members of a democracy), this does not negate the common creatureliness of humans and other creatures. One concept, which helped Francis, as a man of the thirteenth century, to understand the relationship of humans and other creatures in terms not of domination but of mutuality, was the chivalric notion of 'courtesy'.¹⁰² Courtesy is the magnanimous, deferential, respectful attitude which enables love to be shown up and down the social hierarchy. In the community of creation, brothers and sisters on different levels of the hierarchy can interact with mutual respect and loving deference. With the chivalric notion of courtesy Francis fused the traditional monastic virtues of obedience and humility,¹⁰³ so that he can say that obedience 'is subject and

¹⁰⁰ *Legenda Peruginia* 43 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 1021).

¹⁰¹ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 66, 127-8.

¹⁰² See Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 69-75.

submissive to everyone in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well,] that they may do whatever they want with it insofar as it has been given them from above by the Lord'.¹⁰⁴ Here the hierarchy is virtually subverted by mutuality: the obedience which the creatures owe to humanity is reciprocated by an obedience of humanity to the creatures. What Francis envisages, in the end, is a kind of mutual and humble deference in the common service of the creatures to their Creator.

Another theme which has roots in the tradition, as we have seen, but which Francis also made very characteristically his own is that of the duty of all creatures to praise their Creator and of the participation of humans in the worship given by all creation to God. The influence of the psalms and the *Benedicite* is unmistakable in Francis's own liturgical compositions which call on all creatures to praise God.¹⁰⁵ Francis was original in that he translated this liturgical usage into an actual practice of addressing the creatures themselves. This began with the famous sermon to the birds in 1211,¹⁰⁶ which initiated a regular practice: 'From that day on, he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to praise and love their Creator, because daily, invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience.'¹⁰⁷

In this way Francis put into practice a conviction that every creature has its own God-given worth (as he said to the birds: 'God made you noble among His creatures')¹⁰⁸ that should be returned to its source in praise of the Creator. We should also remember Francis's habit of

¹⁰³ On the relationship of humility (and poverty) to Francis's confraternity with creatures, see Boff, *Saint Francis*, pp. 38–40.

¹⁰⁴ *The Praises of the Virtues* (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 134; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 165).

¹⁰⁵ *The Exhortation to the Praise of God* (translation in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 109; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 138) and *The Praises of God before the Office* (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 138–9; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, pp. 161–2). These works echo the psalms that call on all creatures to praise God, the *Benedicite*, and Revelation 5:13. The latter was to be used by the friars before each hour of the office. The influence of Psalm 148 and the *Benedicite* can also be seen in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*; see Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 99, 102–5.

¹⁰⁶ Celano, *Vita Prima* 58 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 277–8; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 234); Fioretti 1.16 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 1336–7).

¹⁰⁷ Celano, *Vita Prima* 58 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 278; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 234); cf. 80–1 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 296–7; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 250–1).

¹⁰⁸ Celano, *Vita Prima* 58 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 278; Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 234).

singing along with cicadas or birds in what he understood as their praise of their Creator.¹⁰⁹ In this way he translated the sentiments of the *Benedicite* into a real human solidarity with the rest of creation understood as a theocentric community existing for the praise and service of God.¹¹⁰

In the famous *Canticle of Brother Sun* or *Canticle of the Creatures*, written at the end of his life, Francis summed up much of his attitude to creation. It is important to appreciate fully the opening two stanzas that praise God before reference is made to the creatures:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,

Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,

and no human is worthy to mention Your name.¹¹¹

That God surpasses the creatures in such a way as to be the only praiseworthy one could not be clearer. So, when the next stanza continues: 'Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures', the praising of the creatures can only be a way of praising their Creator, from whom their praiseworthy features derive. This praise of God with the creatures (stanzas 3–4) is a transition from the praise of God without the creatures (stanzas 1–2) to the praises of God for the creatures, which occupy stanzas 5–13. In these stanzas the various qualities of the creatures are lovingly detailed, so that God may be praised for them. Each of these stanzas begins (in Francis's Italian original): '*Laudato si, mi Signore, per . . .*' followed by reference to one or more of the creatures. There has been controversy over whether the meaning is 'Be praised, my Lord, by . . .' 'Be praised, my Lord, through . . .' or 'Be praised, my Lord, for . . .'. Divergent interpretations of the phrase go back to soon after Francis's death,¹¹² and any would be consistent with his thinking about the creation. But the latest detailed study by Sorrell argues very convincingly for the translation: 'Be praised, my Lord, for . . .'.¹¹³ In that case the canticle does not call on Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water and the rest to praise God, even though

¹⁰⁹ Celano, *Vita Secunda* 171 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 499–500); Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* 8.9 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 695–6); J.R.H. Moorman, *A New Fioretti* 57 (Habig, *St. Francis*, pp. 1881–2).

¹¹⁰ Cf. Boff, *Saint Francis*, pp. 37–8.

¹¹¹ Armstrong, R.J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 113.

¹¹² Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 116–17, 119.

¹¹³ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 118–22.

Francis, as we have seen, could well have done this. Rather the canticle takes up Francis's conviction, which we have also noticed, that human beings should praise God for their fellow-creatures. The creatures are appreciated in three ways: for their practical usefulness in making human life possible and good, for their beauty, and for the way their distinctive qualities reflect the divine being (in particular 'Sir Brother Sun', in his beauty and radiance, resembles God). This is an appreciation of the God-given value of creation which goes far beyond a purely utilitarian, anthropocentric view. It celebrates the interdependent harmony of creation. The canticle is designed to teach people to think of creation with gratitude, appreciation and respect.¹¹⁴

We have considered various aspects of Francis's attitude to and relationships with the non-human creation, but we have still to register the intensity of delight in the creatures that frequently raised Francis to ecstatic rejoicing in their Creator. Some comments from his early biographers will illustrate this:

He used to extol the artistry of [the bees'] work and their remarkable ingenuity, giving glory to the Lord. With such an outpouring, he often used up an entire day or more in praise of them and other creatures.¹¹⁵

He had so much love and sympathy for [the creatures] that he was disturbed when they were treated without respect. He spoke to them with a great inner and exterior joy, as if they had been endowed by God with feeling, intelligence, and speech. Very often it was for him the occasion to become enraptured in God.¹¹⁶

[H]e caressed and contemplated [the creatures] with delight, so much so that his spirit seemed to live in heaven and not on earth.¹¹⁷

This aspect of Francis's relationship to the creatures seems unprecedented in the Christian tradition and warrants speaking of Francis's creation mysticism.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 124.

¹¹⁵ Celano, *Vita Prima* 80 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 296; Armstrong, R. J. et al., eds, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 250).

¹¹⁶ *Legenda Perugina* 49 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 1027).

¹¹⁷ *Legenda Perugina* 51 (Habig, *St. Francis*, p. 1029).

¹¹⁸ See also Chapter 9 in this volume.

Creating the Modern Tradition

Italian Renaissance humanists

A major development in the understanding of the human dominion over nature occurred in the Italian humanist writers of the Renaissance. It was a development which could hardly have taken place except on the basis of the dominant theological tradition of the patristic and medieval periods, which we have already outlined, but it was also a major step beyond that tradition, which has been little enough noticed in discussions of our subject.¹¹⁹ It is this step which can be said to have created the ethos within which the modern project of aggressive domination of nature has taken place.

The Renaissance humanists were preoccupied with the theme of the supreme dignity of humanity, which they not infrequently expounded as exegesis of Genesis 1:26.¹²⁰ Even where reference to the text is not explicit, it is frequently implicit. Moreover, the traditional understanding of the human dominion, which these writers knew not only from the theological tradition but also from the classical sources that had influenced that tradition, is taken entirely for granted. The rest of creation was made for humanity (it was, says Petrarch, 'dedicated to nothing but your uses, and created solely for the service of man').¹²¹ The unique superiority of human nature over the rest of creation equips human beings to rule the world.¹²² But these traditional themes are given unprecedented emphasis and at the same time developed in a novel direction.

A striking feature of the Renaissance humanist idea of humanity is that the vertical relationship of humanity to nature – human beings as rulers over the rest of creation – is emphasized to the virtual exclusion of the horizontal relationship of humanity to nature – human beings as creatures who share with other creatures a common creaturely relationship to the Creator. Humanity's place within creation is abolished in favour of humanity's exaltation above creation. While this takes to an extreme one aspect of the traditional hierarchical thinking, other aspects of the medieval hierarchical view of creation are left aside.

¹¹⁹ Wybrow, *Bible*, pp. 166–71, is one of the few discussions to give it serious attention.

¹²⁰ See especially Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable, 1970).

¹²¹ *De reconditis utriusque fortunae* (1357), quoted in Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, p. 180.

¹²² Cf. Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, p. 192.