
# THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL
## A critical Christian response

Peter Forster and Bernard Donoughue

**The Global Warming Policy Foundation**

GWPF Briefing 20

**GWPF REPORTS**

Views expressed in the publications of the Global Warming Policy Foundation are those of the authors, not those of the GWPF, its Academic Advisory Council members or its directors

# THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL
## A critical Christian response

Peter Forster and Bernard Donoughue

# Contents

## About the authors

Bernard Donoughue is a Labour peer, and was formerly a senior government adviser.
Peter Forster is Bishop of Chester.

# 1 Introduction

The discussion of climate change occupies less than 10% of Pope Francis' encyclical, but those sections have attracted perhaps 90% of the media attention. This contrast illustrates the profile that climate change claims and controversies have in today's public discourse, and also why the Global Warming Policy Foundation was established as a forum for open discussion of questions that have such deep significance for public policy, and the future shape of our civilisation.

This comment, by two trustees of the GWPF – one a lay Catholic, one an ordained Anglican – seeks to take forward the arguments of *Laudato Si*, and to submit them to a degree of friendly analysis. Our thoughts are offered in a personal capacity, and do not represent GWPF as a whole. We will begin with some remarks on wider aspects of the encyclical, then tackle its limited statements on climate change.

# 2 On poverty

We would like to emphasise that we share the Pope's deep desire to reduce poverty in our world, and we agree that the costs should fall more on the richer nations, and the rich within nations, than on those who are poor. Our basic concern is that the environmental and especially the energy policies advocated in the encyclical are more likely to hinder than to advance this great cause (one of us is a lifelong member of the British Labour Party, which was founded precisely to address these issues).

The fundamental narrative of the encyclical is that humankind, especially in developed societies, has tended to become dislocated, or alienated, from its wider natural and communal environment. A healthy and wholesome life will involve a renewed relationship with both the dust from which we have come and the human communities in which we live. In relation to nature, and not least in picking up some traditional Franciscan themes, the Pope focuses upon the divine precept in *Genesis 1 v. 28* :

> Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

In common with many other voices in recent times, he argues that to have dominion does not permit an unsustainable exploitative approach to the natural world. Human power in relation to the resources around us needs to be exercised responsibly and – reverting to the original sense of the word – economically; that is, in a manner that serves the global human household.

One can wholeheartedly endorse this sentiment, provided it does not lead to a romantically myopic view of the impact that human beings will necessarily have upon their environment. Every time a road or house is built, countless numbers of insects and animals are killed or displaced. The same is true when we spray our garden plants,

or crops, with pesticide. Each time we cut our lawn, thousands of small insects are likely to be killed. The impact of human beings on nature is vividly seen on the approach to landing at an airport, as one imagines what the landscape would be like if the houses, factories and roads had never been built. To imagine that human civilisation could develop with no adverse or competitive impact upon the wider natural world would be a misleading idealism. Might the encyclical have been rather more open about these realities?

To us the encyclical is coloured too much by a hankering for a past world, prior to the Industrial Revolution, which is assumed to have been generally simpler, cleaner, and happier. There is little historical evidence for such a vision, and for most people then life was brief, painful, poor, and even brutal.

How is the inevitable human impact upon the natural world to be moderated and mitigated? Here the Pope enters a plea for 'less is more', an ecological spirituality which sidesteps the mindless consumerist spirituality and 'dynamic of dominion', which, he holds, is so destructive in the modern world. Christian spirituality, he says, 'proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little'.

Learning to be joyful whatever the immediate circumstances of life is certainly a Christian virtue. When St Paul wrote 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice' (*Philippians 4 v. 4*) he was imprisoned and awaiting martyrdom. But that is entirely compatible with an aspiration to improve one's immediate human lot, whether that be through improving the quality of public infrastructure, or our homes, or seeking to travel in order precisely to enjoy the opportunities that our planet provides. For any chance of fulfilment, all these hopes need economic development, and inasmuch as the developed western world has achieved a much better quality of life and greater life expectancy than earlier generations or other societies, it is largely due to wealth creation and economic success.

## 3 On fossil fuels

The discovery of new ways to release the energy stored in fossil fuels was integral to the Industrial Revolution upon which modern western society is based. Let us not forget that fossil fuels are nature's primary, and very efficient, means of storing the energy of the sun. Burning them has everywhere diverted human beings from burning wood, killing whales and seals, and damming streams: there were therefore genuine environmental benefits to be gained from the switch to fossil fuels. Nature is in most trouble in societies that have not yet made the switch. Steam power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries evolved into the internal combustion engine, a national electricity grid and the central heating of homes. The industrial processes did, and do, produce pollution, but this tends best to come under control in the wealthier societies. Contemporary pollution is at its worst in the intermediate stages of devel-

opment in emerging economies, and will best be tackled by allowing those societies to apply their growing wealth to such wider aims. Stopping their growth at this point would be unlikely to produce the results which the Pope desires. He warns – a little apocalyptically – that 'we may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth.' This may actually be more likely in a world of stunted economic growth. Many deaths of older people are caused, or hastened, in winter by 'fuel poverty', which is undoubtedly being made worse in the UK by current environmental policies. This is another reason why the availability of cheap energy is of such wide social importance, and why we question the virtue in supporting forms of renewable energy that are inefficient and require huge subsidies, which are levied upon everyone's electricity bills, including the poorest in our society.

# 4 On markets

There is a great deal in the encyclical about the evils of 'the market', which 'tends to promote extreme consumerism'. This is described as the 'logic which underlies present-day culture', the 'mindset of short-term gain and results, which dominates present-day economics and politics'. There is obviously much that should be heeded in these warnings, but it is unclear precisely what alternative the Pope is advocating – presumably not a return to discredited communism, which caused such human misery in the twentieth century.

Markets are, and always have been, the mechanism by which the fruits of human activity and enterprise are established and shared. They need oversight and regulation by wider organs of society, and particularly governments, to avoid the dangers of monopoly, or undue exploitation of human beings and nature alike. Tax policy, planning laws and regulatory bodies are commonly deployed to offer a smoothing effect upon the crude operation of the market. As societies become more complex and inter-related, such regulatory mechanisms tend to grow, amid periodic calls for a countervailing deregulation.

In addition, religious groups and other bodies will appeal to the consciences of individuals to exercise their particular choices for the common good, in a variety of ways, including support for charitable endeavours or personal restraint. At one level, this is the major thrust of the encyclical: a plea for the cultivation of 'sound virtues', which avoid the temptations of excessive consumerism.

In these ways market forces will be regulated and restrained, and rightly so. The recent crises in the banking industry illustrate the consequences of the failure of such restraints, upon both corporate and individual greed. In the future, the operation of banks and financial markets will be supervised and regulated much more closely. But a call for such regulation is quite different from the sort of attack upon markets in principle that the Pope's encyclical could be read as encouraging. Markets are the

lifeblood of wealth creation, and wealth creation is the necessary, if not sufficient, prerequisite to the lasting alleviation of poverty.

## 5 On science and consensus

The specific references in the encyclical to climate change are set against a recognition 'that the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or replace politics'. The Pope says that he is 'concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good'. This is precisely the aim of the GWPF, of course, but we note that in the encyclical the existence of economic and scientific voices who challenge the current majority position is not acknowledged. In the past such majority views have often proved to be wrong. We believe that the ever more shrill warnings issued by those representing the current majoritarian position reflect the growing criticism of the assumptions and policy assertions of that position.

From its apparent declaration of scientific neutrality, the encyclical simply accepts that 'a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system'. While recognising that other natural causes affect the global climate, the Pope notes that 'a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to…greenhouse gas…released mainly as a result of human activity'.

There is little doubt that, over the past century or so, there has been a rise in the average global temperature of around 0.8°C. Whether this has been, or is, 'disturbing', is less certain. Agricultural yields for most produce are at an all-time high, as evidenced by recent negative food inflation in the UK, despite the foolish diversion of food crops to make expensive biofuels. Further rises in world temperatures would be likely to have a significant impact upon agriculture, but by no means all of this would necessarily be a matter for concern.

In this respect we would question the description of carbon dioxide as a 'pollutant'. It is vital to all plant growth, and indeed commercial growers often pump it into greenhouses in order to accelerate growth. The human body is not adversely affected by higher carbon dioxide levels, as is evidenced by submarines, which typically operate with levels about 400% higher than in the atmosphere. We sympathise with much of what the Pope says about waste and pollution, but this has little to do with carbon dioxide. The fact that those advocating the majoritarian view now refer emotively to a part of our natural atmosphere that is vital to life as a pollutant, and to those who question the majority consensus as 'deniers', with unpleasant echoes of Holocaust denial, simply serves to illustrate the underlying fragility of their arguments. Some fossil fuels certainly produce pollution, in various forms, and these are rightly being

reduced, especially in wealthier societies, but carbon dioxide is emphatically not a pollutant in these terms.

# 6 On adaptation

Africa is often cited as a continent that would be especially vulnerable to a rise in global temperatures, but a recent GWPF report detailed the situation in Zambia,* where yields of maize are 400% greater than 40 years ago, partly due to changed weather patterns. It is very difficult to predict with any certainty what the impact would be on world food production of a further significant rise in average global temperatures.

We fully share the concern of the Pope for the severe poverty that is found in many parts of Africa, but to deny the continent a wider access to cheap fossil fuels and electricity generated by them will only serve to embed that poverty. We would also express the concern that the continued use of wood and dung fires for cooking, although 'carbon neutral' in current parlance, actually causes millions of unnecessary deaths each year. This too is a serious moral issue and one that is not recognised in the encyclical.

Human history is largely a story of successful adaptation to all manner of changing circumstances, and the potential for such adaption should not be underestimated. The billions – tens and even hundreds of billions – of pounds that are in the process of being spent on the very uncertain programme to curtail carbon dioxide emissions, would surely be better spent on assisting communities engage in such processes of adaptation. The encyclical hardly refers to such potential to adapt, even if the current predictions of climate change eventually prove to be accurate.

There are clear grounds for caution here, given recent failures to predict climate change with any accuracy. A good example is provided by the 2010 publication by the Royal Society,† which was essentially based upon the 2007 IPCC assessment. The Royal Society referred to a range of projected increases in average global temperature, based on the current trajectory of carbon dioxide emissions, as between 1.8–7.1°C by 2100. Over a shorter timescale the Royal Society continued:

> The uncertainty in the predicted warming as a result of human activity over the next two decades is smaller, the range being 0.2–0.4°C per decade.

So far, warming at this rate has not been recorded; indeed there has been no significant upward trend in average global temperature during the present century, leading the IPCC to refer to a 'hiatus', perhaps – it is claimed – due to the oceans absorbing more heat than anticipated. Only time will, or can, tell to what extent the IPCC con-

* Lee P. *Ethics and climate change policy*. Essay 2. GWPF.

† Pethica J et al. *Climate change: a summary of the science*. Royal Society, 2010.

sensus will be verified empirically. At present, it is based largely on theoretical projections.

## 7 On the precautionary principle

Indirectly acknowledging these scientific uncertainties, the Pope quotes the Rio Declaration of 1992, that:

> …where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a pretext for postponing cost-effective measures.

This is the so-called 'precautionary principle', which can easily be invoked to disguise a weak evidential base. The last thing our world needs now is an exaggerated scaremongering. Rather it needs a cool, rational analysis of the evidence, and the risks attached to different courses of action.

There is a need to develop alternative energy technologies, provided that they are not unduly expensive, or take up too much land. The world's fossil fuels, which are a finite if increasingly accessible resource, do need to be used as efficiently and cleanly as possible, in relation to the real dangers of pollution – not carbon dioxide – which exist. But the policies that the encyclical advocates, both directly and by implication, do not constitute a precautionary insurance policy. They represent a huge gamble upon assumptions and predictions concerning possible climate change and its consequences, which are not yet sufficiently confirmed by evidence and observable facts. The encyclical's attempt to link the 'green' campaign to curb climate change with his commendable aim to curb poverty seems to us to be both unconvincing and potentially counterproductive. A couple of obvious lacunae illustrate its limitations.

Firstly, there is the difficult question of population growth. The world's population is expected to exceed 10 billion later this century. Ironically, the most likely way to avoid this would be to have precisely the worldwide economic growth against which the Pope warns, as there is plenty of evidence that as a country's wealth increases, its birth-rate typically falls. There are different views that can be taken about the likely impact of an ever-growing world population, but a responsible account of the fundamental issues facing our planet over the coming century would need to set out the possible dangers of an ever-growing population. What would the precautionary principle recommend (and not least to the Roman Catholic Church) in this respect?

Secondly, the encyclical makes only a passing and rather negative reference to nuclear energy. All serious estimates of how a substantially decarbonised world economy can be achieved require a substantial contribution from nuclear energy. The World Council of Churches has formally rejected the future use of both nuclear energy and fossil fuels, thus guaranteeing both low growth and blackouts. Where do the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church stand on this crucial issue?

# 8 Conclusions

Overall, the encyclical strikes us as well-meaning but somewhat naïve. Its gentle idealism longs for a world in which cats no longer chase mice, a world in which species do not kill and eat each other (most do), a world in which species no longer become extinct, despite the firmly established scientific fact that most of the species that have existed have already become extinct through the normal operation of the evolutionary process. Much of what he recommends in his 'ecological spirituality' – a regular day of rest, an economic market that is our servant and not our master, and a proper recognition of the rootedness of human life in the wider natural world – is valuable and commendable. But to regard economic growth as somehow evil, and fossil fuels as pollutants, will only serve to increase the very poverty that he seeks to reduce.

**GWPF BRIEFINGS**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Andrew Turnbull | The Really Inconvenient Truth or 'It Ain't Necessarily So' |
| 2 | Philipp Mueller | The Greening of the Sahel |
| 3 | William Happer | The Truth about Greenhouse Gases |
| 4 | Gordon Hughes | The Impact of Wind Power on Household Energy Bills |
| 5 | Matt Ridley | The Perils of Confirmation Bias |
| 6 | Philipp Mueller | The Abundance of Fossil Fuels |
| 7 | Indur Goklany | Is Global Warming the Number One Threat to Humanity? |
| 8 | Andrew Montford | The Climate Model and the Public Purse |
| 9 | Philipp Mueller | UK Energy Security: Myth and Reality |
| 10 | Andrew Montford | Precipitation, Deluge and Flood |
| 11 | Susan Crockford | On the Beach |
| 12 | Madhav Khandekar | Floods and Droughts in the Indian Monsoon |
| 13 | Indur Goklany | Unhealthy Exaggeration |
| 14 | Susan Crockford | Twenty Reasons not to Worry about Polar Bears |
| 15 | Various | The Small Print |
| 16 | Susan Crockford | The Arctic Fallacy |
| 17 | Indur Goklany | The Benefits of Carbon Dioxide |
| 18 | Judith Curry | The Climate Debate in the USA |
| 19 | Indur Goklany | The Papal Academies' Broken Moral Compass |
| 20 | Donoughue and Forster | The Papal Encyclical: a Critical Christian Response |

The Global Warming Policy Foundation is an all-party and non-party think tank and a registered educational charity which, while openminded on the contested science of global warming, is deeply concerned about the costs and other implications of many of the policies currently being advocated.

Our main focus is to analyse global warming policies and their economic and other implications. Our aim is to provide the most robust and reliable economic analysis and advice. Above all we seek to inform the media, politicians and the public, in a newsworthy way, on the subject in general and on the misinformation to which they are all too frequently being subjected at the present time.

The key to the success of the GWPF is the trust and credibility that we have earned in the eyes of a growing number of policy makers, journalists and the interested public. The GWPF is funded overwhelmingly by voluntary donations from a number of private individuals and charitable trusts. In order to make clear its complete independence, it does not accept gifts from either energy companies or anyone with a significant interest in an energy company.

**Views expressed in the publications of the Global Warming Policy Foundation are those of the authors, not those of the GWPF, its trustees, its Academic Advisory Council members or its directors.**

Published by the Global Warming Policy Foundation

For further information about GWPF or a print copy of this report, please contact:

The Global Warming Policy Foundation
10 Upper Bank Street, London E14 5NP.
T 020 7006 5827
M 07553 361717

www.thegwpf.org

Registered in England, No 6962749
Registered with the Charity Commission, No 1131448