

Justice by Faith and Eco-justice: Contours of a Life in the Spirit before the Ecocide (of the) Unlimited¹

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Abstract

This essay critically examines Christian spirituality in the context of the global ecological crisis, arguing that the prevailing “spirit of the unlimited” under financial capitalism drives ecological destruction and social injustice. Drawing on Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’ and Reformation theology, the author contends that Christian faith—particularly the “liberating limit” introduced through justification by faith—offers a decisive interruption to the destructive logic of unlimited expansion. The essay critiques the technocratic paradigm and neocolonial practices in the Global South, highlighting the lived realities of communities affected by extractive industries. It further interrogates the limitations of Laudato Si’s theological framework, suggesting that a more robust Christological and ecclesiological grounding is needed. Ultimately, the essay proposes that authentic Christian spirituality, rooted in communal worship and the transformative power of the Spirit, calls for resilient, solidaristic commitment to eco-justice, integrating care for creation with justice for the marginalised as a witness to the justice of faith.

Keywords: Ecology crisis; Poverty; Capitalism; Theology; Diaconic-Politic Witness

Introduction

This essay on Christian “spirituality” in our current context takes as its point of departure the thesis that the so-called “spirit (of the) unlimited” constitutes a fundamental impetus within the dominant global cultural regime under the prevailing rule of financial capitalism. It is this spirit, according to the present analysis, that ultimately animates the ongoing ecocidal trajectory threatening the annihilation of the planet. Against this backdrop, the essay contends that, in the face of the destructive tyranny of the unlimited, faith in Jesus Christ offers a decisive interruption by means of a “liberating limit”.

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Analogous to the ongoing renewal or revolution effected through justification by faith, the essential contours of a life in the Spirit are revealed as a resilient and solidaristic commitment to eco-justice. In this regard, while not claiming exclusivity for this interlocutor, reference will be made to Pope Francis' seminal Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, particularly its analogous reflection on spirituality and "ecological conversion".

The tyrannical regime of the unlimited

People like me, originating from a nation within the Southern Cone of South America, have witnessed firsthand how multinational corporations that dominate extractive industries under the guise of "agro-industry" or "agribusiness" celebrate the virtual dissolution of traditional nation-state borders. This phenomenon is encapsulated in the rhetoric of a so-called "United Republic of Soy"². The propagandistic invocation of "republic" by these multinationals in fact masks an underlying reality that more closely resembles tyranny or dictatorship. The "green spot" on the South American map, to which they refer, conceals a legacy characterised by the advance of a transgenic desert, the plundering of wealth, the dispassion and poisoning of peoples, devastated ecosystems, and corrupted institutions. This violent reality, symptomatic of a neocolonial transformation of the region, is epitomised in the triumphalist slogan: "Soy knows no borders!"

From the vantage point of the Global South, however, our lived experience diverges sharply from the symbolic and discursive representations advanced by multinational corporate propaganda. What becomes evident is the persistent recurrence of a fundamental motive within the globally dominant cultural regime, namely the pursuit of that "which knows no limits." This emergent order, which seeks to establish itself as absolute and to appropriate all alterity through both material and symbolic violence, is exemplified in the motto of a prominent American software company specialising in international finance and trade: NetSuite, which proclaims, "One system, no limits".³

Within the context of our globalised civilisation, dominated by the forces of financial capitalism⁴, references to this "spirit of the unlimited" are discernible in various passages

² See Castro 2016: "In 2003, Syngenta published adverts in the rural supplements of Argentina's two bestselling daily newspapers in which it referred to the Southern Cone countries that have seen the spread of the "new green gold" – Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia – as the "United Republic of Soybeans"; Schalk 2021: "In 2003, the agrichemical behemoth Syngenta published a controversial advertisement in Argentinian newspapers. It showed a map of South America with a large portion of the Southern Cone – Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil – highlighted in green and labelled the 'United Republic of Soybeans.'"

³ A pertinent observation for understanding the historical context that first enabled a dynamic, mobile social density – and which is connected to the origins of Western individualism, as well as the spread of private property and monetary systems across Eurasia from around 800 BC – proposes that "...the pre-Socratic philosophy, beginning in Miletus, the first fully monetarized polis, is essentially determined by the thought of the money subject. Those thinkers – from Thales to Parmenides, but first of all Anaximander, who produces the concept of the unlimited (apeiron) to designate the One in the Plural – are consciously understood as individuals. His fundamental question points to the One in the Plural, just as one can transform money into all merchandise..." (Duchrow 2016:162).

⁴ For more regarding this, see Daniel Beros 2014. The article was later also published in Duchrow and Ulrich 2015.

of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (*LS*).⁵ Notably, the magisterial text identifies "the human roots of the ecological crisis" (*LS* Chapter III), focusing on: "I. Technology: creativity and power" (*LS* §§ 102–105), "II. The globalization of the technocratic paradigm" (*LS* §§ 106–114), and "III. The crisis and effects of modern anthropocentrism" (*LS* §§ 115–136).⁶

Within the encyclical, these roots are addressed by means of a notion of sin that remains largely moralistic ("errors, sins, faults and failures," *LS* § 218). However, from the perspective of the biblical and Reformed traditions, the spiritual motive at the root of the ecological crisis is articulated above all as a lamentable desire for the unlimited. In the contemporary world, governed by technological and military power in the service of global finance, this desire for the unlimited has been exacerbated to the point of posing a genuine threat of annihilation to all creation, with the poorest and most vulnerable as its first victims.

The New Testament designates this desire for the unlimited as "the concupiscence of the flesh" (cf. Gal 5:13ff). In the light of Scripture, the Reformation characterised this hermetic closure within the economy of unlimited human desire—manifest in the expansion of European mercantilism and colonialism—as *incurvatio in se ipsum* (a turning or bending in upon oneself). Humanity's ostensible "self-determination" was thus construed as the product and expression of its *servo arbitrio* (bondage of the will). In a similar vein, to speak of the human being as "subject" recalls the etymological root of the Latin *sub-iectum* – that which is "placed under," "subservient," or "subjected". In humanity's blind devotion to the "spirit of the unlimited" that has imposed the current global, ever-expanding system with its insatiable greed for capital and "natural resources", humanity not only tyrannises the world but is itself tyrannised. This paradoxical tyranny is aptly described in the encyclical: "We have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course" (*LS* § 53).

If the foregoing analysis of our present human and civilisational condition indeed captures the essence of "what is real" (*quod res est*), one must acknowledge the significant contribution of Francis' encyclical to fostering serious debate on issues such as the relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the interconnectedness of all things, and its critique of the "self-centred culture of instant gratification." Yet, beyond these points, and in view of this essay's theme, one must also ask: Is it prudent to formulate a response to the encyclical's plea from the perspective of Christian spirituality by appealing to the fundamental attitude of human "self-transcendence"?

⁵ In other analytical-descriptive contexts, when speaking of the factors that resulted in the current "ecological crisis", the pontiff refers to categories concerning (the loss or suppression of) "limits" and the "unlimited" (or to their opposite, namely "finite" and the "infinite") more than thirty times.

⁶ In one of the key passages of the chapter and of the whole encyclical (*LS* § 106), one sees an example of the relevance of the problem of the unlimited in papal discourse. Here it is emphasised that the fundamental problem "it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*." The letter argues that this scheme corresponds to "a concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation." And later it concludes: "This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit" [own italics].

Would this not risk inadvertently reinforcing “the spirit of the unlimited” through religious or theological self-justification? If so, where is “another direction” to be found?

The justice by faith: a liberating limit

A preliminary and significant indication of such an “alternative direction” may be discerned by attending, first to the liturgical practice of communal worship, as observed weekly within my own faith community, the Evangelical Church of the Río de la Plata. In this context, worshippers are collectively invited to listen and confess, in concert with the psalmist, their shared hope in the advent of God: “From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth” (Ps 121:2). From this vantage point, the otherwise hermetically sealed world of humanity and its institutions is opened when God’s very self enters history through the agency of the Spirit. This decisive intervention occurs in the proclamation of the “Word of the Cross” (1 Cor. 1:18). In this Word, God’s incomparable love for the world is disclosed in a manner characterised by divine wisdom and justice – marked by what appears as “folly” to human standards. Here, God declares unconditional solidarity with the marginalised – the “no one” or “nothing” – the victims of the unrestrained desire for appropriation and domination that typifies *home peccator*. Simultaneously, this Word pronounces judgement upon the victimising powers of those who, in seeking to be “someone”, surrender themselves uncritically to God.

Whoever, by faith, entrusts themselves to the Word and justice of God – to the gratuitous judgement and decision of God manifest in the resurrection of the Crucified – thereby justifies God in God’s Word and judgement (Ps 51:4). In so doing, one renounces, without reservation or condition, personal interests, calculations, and arguments, ceasing to live by one’s own interests, calculations, and arguments, ceasing to live by one’s own judgements and capacities, and instead living by possibilities and justice of the One who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that were reduced to nothing, that they may live” (Rom 4:17). Through the justice of the faith, one lives only by the *iustitia aliena crucis*, thus concretely permitting “God be God”⁷ in God’s Word and judgement, realised through God’s radical self-limitation (Jüngel 1990:151–162). In this manner, the Holy Spirit of grace establishes a “liberating limit” through which the Spirit manifests itself as the power of life. Thus, it is by the Spirit that the Triune God paradoxically forges a redemptive path, opening hope for those ensnared (and perishing) in the sacrificial violence engendered by the idolatry of the unlimited.

With these considerations as a backdrop, we may resume engagement with the arguments advanced in *Laudato Si’* concerning the potential contribution of Christian faith and spirituality in addressing the ecological crisis confronting humanity. This contribution is affirmed in the encyclical that states:

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation

⁷ See Watson 2000: Only then will that human being be left behind who “by nature cannot want God to be God; rather, he wants him to be God, and God is not God” according to description offered by Martin Luther in Thesis 17 of the “Disputation against Scholastic Theology” (1517).

underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of 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. (*LS* § 75)

This passage foregrounds the relationship between the concept of God and the human issues of power, violence, and limitation, in a manner analogous to the foregoing discussion. However, it is necessary to note a significant Christological and soteriological “deficit” that appears throughout the encyclical.⁸ The invocation of “[T]he figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world” as “the best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth”, remains fundamentally indebted to classical metaphysics, and thereby inherits the problematic aspects associated with that tradition – at least in relation to our present inquiry. Limiting ourselves to two principal concerns: first, in “re-proposing” the concept of an “almighty God” in such terms, does one not risk presenting a “human, all too human” conception of the divine? Is there not a danger of perpetuating a speculative feedback loop of the very “will to power” that is purportedly being resisted – a will that “knows no limits” in its self-referentiality? Second, in proposing the “figure” of a “Father who creates and who alone owns the world”, does this not risk the kind of “iconic” mediation of the divine, against which the second commandment warns (Ex 20:4s.)? Might this not render the concept susceptible to both subtle and overt manipulation and instrumentalisation by the same unbounded will to power?

Life in the Spirit – in the service of eco-justice

As established in the previous section, the requisite “change of course” (*metanoia*, Mk 1:14ss) is fundamentally a matter of “suffering” again and again the *verbum crucis* (1 Cor 2:2), of “allowing oneself to be pulled into the path of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event” (Bonhoeffer 1983:253). In this way, believers are ushered into an ineffable process of becoming – a perpetual renewal and transformation of their existence. Led by the Spirit of God, they open themselves to God’s reign, to the divine summons to a life in communion and solidarity with those who, having been lost, have now found themselves anew in Jesus Christ. This openness extends to both God and neighbour, beginning with the marginalised – both humanity and the suffering creation, which groans together in eager longing for the revelation of daughters and sons of God (Rom 8:18ff).

Accordingly, following the trajectory of biblical- reforming theology involves being incorporated into the “school of the Holy Spirit”. It is within this “school” that Mary herself learned to bear witness to the God of the Promise, who, with the advent of divine justice and cruciform action “lowers the high and raises the fallen; breaks that which is

⁸ Within the framework of the encyclical, the Christological references are concentrated in section VII “The gaze of Jesus” (*LS* §96-100), of its Second Chapter “The Gospel of Creation”. Here a rhetoric of the exemplum of the earthly Jesus predominates as an archetype of a healthy bond with creation, rather than that of the sacramentum as a mediator of salvation (aspect not only restricted but somewhat dissociated from the first.

something and from that which is nothing creates that which God loves.”⁹ For only those who offer themselves as instruments of justice are granted the capacity to discern the locus where the manifestation of the new, in its transformative and renewing power, may be awaited: the new creature and creation of God in Jesus Christ. That eschatological *topos*, with which the promise of the renewed irruption of the justice of God is realised, is found wherever the mutual testimony to the Word of the Cross occurs – as a sacramental anticipation of a renewal that encompasses and extends to all creation. The way of life continually reacted in this *topos* becomes decisively manifested as *vita passiva* (passive life) – as a life constituted by “suffering” the cruciform Word.¹⁰

Precisely because the church is a creature of that Word (*creatura verbi*) (and not of any other words it might speak to itself), the community of followers called to be the church is summoned to bear witness to the promised advent of the “alien justice” (*iustitia aliena*). The church exists in and for the entirety of creation, participating in the broad, cooperative, “ecumenical” pursuit of eco-justice; that is, in a renewed fidelity, solidarity and commitment to both the right to a dignified life for the poor (economy) as well as of the care of all creation (ecology).¹¹ This resilient, compassionate and tangible witness – manifested across the diverse spheres of personal and collective existence (church, politics, economy, education, culture, science, et cetera) – is an inherent and inseparable expression of the justice of faith. Such are the essential contours of the church’s life in the power of the life-giving Spirit of the “crucified messiah”.

If we briefly return to the dialogue with *Laudato Si’* regarding the contribution of Christian spirituality on to the imperative of “ecological conversion” (*LS* § 216-221), it is equally necessary to inquire whether its emphasis on cultivating in people “adequate motivations”, “internal incentives”, “virtues”, animated by a “mysticism” modelled after Francis of Assisi (*LS* § 10-12; § 218ss), does not entail certain difficulties. Here one detects a possible eschatological and ecclesiological deficit. This prompts further reflection on the conditions necessary for overcoming the self-referentiality of the religious subject, as the encyclical does not sufficiently clarify the critical-communicative dimension of faith (and not merely its communal projection, *LS* § 219) in line with the concerns articulated above.

Brief final reflexions

Returning to our place in the Global South, we cannot but welcome the timely contribution of *Laudato Si’* in relation to the serious and urgent challenges posed by the current ecological crisis which, driven by the “spirit (of the) unlimited”, threatens to destroy “our common home” (*oikumene*). The critical observations made in this essay do not prevent us from celebrating its aspects that are of enormous value and that reveal a growing convergence, such as the one on the indissoluble relationship between justice for exploited peoples and the devastation of creation. Changes in political regimes throughout Latin America over the last decade were often marked by an enormous capacity for manipulation by and intervention of global hegemonic powers – as shown

⁹ See Luther (1967:377–436); for a discussion of the principles of a theological epistemology based on a rereading of this text of the Reformer, see Beros 2011.

¹⁰ On this see: Beros 2016b.

¹¹ I make use of the term in the sense enunciated by Kerber (2013:34).

by the Pope's recent statements on the phenomenon of lawfare, juridical war. However, it remains essential not to dissociate either environmental damage resulting from foreign imposition of pseudo-democratic regimes (silently endorsed by the "international community"). These regimes, through extreme financial liberalisation, aggressive extractivism and excessive foreign debt, sacrifice on the altar of a "deified market" (*LS* § 56) entire peoples and countries, recommencing the colonial drama. At the expense of whom or of what will our states pay such a mortgage? What kind of ecumenical spirituality would be ours, what would be our justice, if we were to listen to "the groans of creation" without recognising "in, with and under" them the "cry of the poor" that never ceases to rise to the sky, clamouring for justice, and vice versa?

From the vantage point of the Global South, we must unequivocally affirm the timeliness and significance of *Laudato Si'* in addressing the grave and urgent challenges of the current ecological crisis – a crisis propelled by the "spirit of the unlimited" and threatening the destruction of our "common home" (*oikumene*). While the critical perspectives articulated in this essay do not preclude us from celebrating the encyclical's substantial contributions, they do underscore the importance of those elements that reveal a growing convergence, particularly the recognition of the indissoluble nexus between justice for exploited peoples and the devastation of creation.

Recent shifts in political regimes across Latin America have frequently been characterised by pronounced manipulation and intervention on the part of global hegemonic powers, as evidenced by Pope Francis's recent commentary on the phenomenon of lawfare, or juridical warfare.¹² It remains imperative, however, not to dissociate environmental degradation from the externally imposed pseudo-democratic regimes – often tacitly endorsed by the so-called "international community". Through extreme financial liberalisation, aggressive extractivism, and the imposition of unsustainable foreign debt, these regimes sacrifice entire peoples and nations upon the altar of a "deified market" (*LS* §56), thereby perpetuating the colonial drama anew. At whose expense, or at what cost, will our states service such an onerous mortgage? What form of ecumenical spirituality, what conception of justice, could we possibly claim if we were to heed "the groans of creation" (cf. Rom 8:22) without simultaneously discerning "in, with, and under" them the "cry of the poor" – a cry that unceasingly ascends to the heavens, clamouring for justice, and, conversely, if we were to hear the cry of the poor without recognising its intrinsic connection to the suffering of creation?

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¹² <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/06/04/pope-francis-judges-there-no-justice-when-there-inequality>.

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