



Separate the Spiritual From the Political

Doug Bandow

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Pope Francis has arrived in America after visiting Cuba. His message goes well beyond the Catholic faithful. As he declared in the recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he was addressing “every person living on this planet.”

The Pontiff’s predominant appeal is spiritual, not political. His commitment to the poor and our shared world is obvious. Most people yearn for meaning in their lives which no government can provide. More than his recent predecessors, he speaks into the lives of common people.

However, the papal visit has generated controversy because Pope Francis appears to be a man of the Left. Of course, religious imperatives may have political implications. For instance, Christian Scripture and church tradition require concern for the poor and environment. But God mandated no specific solutions. There is no “Christian” answer to the many social ills. Instead, in addressing human challenges the Apostle James tells us to use the wisdom which God provides.

Unfortunately, the Holy Father sometimes blurs the line between the spiritual and the political. Indeed, at times *Laudato Si'* sounds like a policy paper published by the Democratic National Committee. The Pope overestimates the wisdom and efficacy of politics while minimizing the power and virtue of markets.

Consider environmental issues, of great concern to Pope Francis, who spoke of an “ecological spirituality” in *Laudato Si'*. Stewardship is an important Christian responsibility. However, the relationship between humans and the world around them always has been complex. Contrary to common myth, people in early societies, like those living in developing nations today, often treated “the environment” with greater carelessness, even hostility, than do residents of advanced industrial societies.

The pontiff also assumes the worst regarding the environment. He earlier warned: “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.” Yet this is not the world in which most Americans live. Much of the environmental news actually is quite good. For instance, air and water generally are cleaner than they were even a few years ago. An issue of great interest to the Catholic Church is the slowdown in population growth, which essentially destroyed any case for coercive population controls.

Important environmental problems remain, of course. However, capitalism helps answer even the toughest questions. For instance, greater economic development and innovation provide the means to solve often complex problems. Rich countries use energy more efficiently and deploy more sophisticated environmental technologies. Enforceable property rights hold landowners accountable for their actions, encouraging improved stewardship.

Markets also promote efficient trade-offs, highlighting the benefits and costs of alternative policies. In *Laudato Si'* the Pontiff appeared to suggest the common good yields only one correct environmental standard. He doubted the legitimacy of opposing views, complaining of “obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, [which] can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions.” However, facts are not a matter of faith. Elsewhere in the encyclical the Pope acknowledged “that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views.” The consensus that the climate is warming does not extend to how much and how fast temperatures are likely to rise, as well as how great the likely social impact and how best to cope with those effects. Even when the objective is clear, such as addressing climate change, there typically are multiple means of achieving any particular end.

If, for instance, one believes temperatures are rising and the consequences will be serious, there still are many possible solutions. One is mitigation, a highly costly attempt to lower temperature by cutting energy use. Another is counteracting the impact indirectly, such as planting trees and promoting technological transformations. A third strategy is adaptation, a much less expensive policy of adjusting to specific problems. Which is best is a matter of man’s wisdom rather than God’s commandment. Markets typically are better than governments even in protecting “future generations,” in which politicians have little interest since the former do not vote.

When markets do not operate and property rights do not exist, some government action is necessary to ensure environmental protection. Nevertheless, policymakers must recognize the inherent infirmities of politics. There is no guarantee that increasing the power of parliaments, bureaucracies, and courts will solve environmental or other social problems. Yet the Pope in *Laudato Si'* largely ignored the government’s own woeful environmental record. In fact, politics inevitably reflects government’s and humanity’s imitations. Not everyone who claims to represent the common good does so; politicians and environmentalists are no more virtuous than businessmen and conservatives. Moreover, as Public Choice economists observed long ago, organized special interest groups which receive concentrated benefits from government policies tend to organize and defeat the disinterested, distracted public.

Yet the Holy Father used the encyclical to advocate not just more government, but more global government. The farther regulatory bureaucracies are from the people, the less accountable the former will be, especially to the poor and dispossessed. The more power invested in those who are unaccountable, the greater and more malign the ultimate impact of human sin.

Perhaps the most important trade-off ignored by the Pope is the importance of the free economy in providing wealth and opportunity—which improves the chance of living a fulfilling life—for the poor and disadvantaged. Pope Francis has spoken of the dignity of work and its importance for all. Yet the best jobs, those with good working conditions and higher pay delivering greater satisfaction are most likely to proliferate in competitive and innovative economies. These

systems are threatened by politicians who meddle and manipulate. The more expensive and extensive the controls, the fewer and less remunerative the jobs.

Thus, while the pontiff's moral judgments deserve respect, his economic opinions warrant less consideration. His formative economic experience came in Argentina, a statist kleptocracy which enshrined injustice. Very different is the U.S., which, though highly imperfect, possesses generally open and competitive markets. The principal lesson from Argentina and similar systems is the importance of avoiding political restrictions on the economy.

Economic liberty, that is, freedom to work, invest, trade, and create is an outgrowth of the wondrous creativity with which God has infused mankind. How to practice that creativity, however, requires guidance from the Pontiff as well as other moral and spiritual leaders rather than the dictates of politicians and bureaucrats in Washington.

Indeed, America's economic system must not be exempt from moral judgment. Government privileges are unjust, yielding unfair income distributions. The opportunity to consume does not mean that one should consume. Although resource depletion is largely a myth, things can become yet another idol.

The Holy Father helpfully reminds us that God calls his children to far more than economic growth. In *Laudato Si'* the Pope observed that "the emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume." Neither politicians nor businessmen can fill that void.

Pope Francis deserves a warm welcome in the U.S. He is an important moral and spiritual leader who speaks to people's deepest human needs. However, Americans should respond more skeptically when he moves from spiritual to political matters. His status as the Vicar of Christ gives him no special qualification as a political pundit.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a member of the Advisory Board of the Acton Institute.