

Article

From Ecotheology to Ecospirituality in *Laudato sí*—Ecological Spirituality beyond Christian Religion

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Abstract: This article discusses the notion of ecotheology, its origins and the conceptual framework of meaning, particularly within Christian theology, in order to establish its relation to the notion of ecospirituality. The article researches how ecological theology may ground an ecological spirituality. Then, it uses both notions to (1) analyze Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato sí*, (2) identify what models of ecotheology are used in his approach, (3) trace significant ecotheological dimensions, proposals, practices and lifestyles conveyed, (4) investigate if it is possible to identify the presence of an ecospirituality, concluding affirmatively. Finally, it asks whether *Laudato sí*'s ecospirituality is only meaningful and operative within a Christian spiritual framework or if, in many respects, it may be also inspirational and significant beyond a Christian realm of meaning. It concludes that *Laudato sí*'s ecological spirituality offers common ground for synergies with other religious, non-religious and secular ecospiritualities which can be synergic contributors to the creation of networks of action and meaning that can be implemented in order to develop a common passionate and effective protection of our world on environmental matters. The methodology used is a critical and hermeneutical documental analysis by means of reviewing significant literature in this area of knowledge.

Keywords: ecotheology; ecospirituality; *Laudato sí*; integral ecology; ecological conversion; Christian spirituality; interreligious dialogue; secular spirituality



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1. Introduction

Ecotheology is becoming a major area of study within contextual Christian theology, but not only as a response to the present ecological disruption the world is facing. Yet, recent scientific literature testifies to the fact that ecotheology is giving way to ecospirituality.

This paper studies both notions, researching the reasons for this evolution, the consequences and opportunities it brings, not only to Christian theology, but to the effective ecological reparation the planet needs. It analyzes Pope Francis' Social Encyclical Letter *Laudato sí* (LS), identifying the main ecotheological and ecospiritual approaches and guidelines conveyed in it. The notions of 'integral ecology' and 'ecological conversion' are proposed as key concepts (Billet 2021; Crabbé 2022) that link both notions of ecotheology and ecospirituality, as they unfold in Pope Francis' text to actual social, political, economic and cultural contexts of present times.

Finally, it is claimed that *Laudato sí*'s conveys an ecospirituality not only valid to Christians alone, but one that may also be significant and inspirational beyond a Christian realm of meaning, enabling what can be named a transreligious ecospirituality. It is open to dialogue with other ecospiritualities and may foster synergies and networks for the implementation of practical and effective ecological changes with religious, non-religious and secular ecological spiritualities.

2. Ecotheology and the Encyclical Letter *Laudato sí*

The notion of ecotheology is not ancient even if its grassroots are. In spite of being used in scholarly and theological texts of different religious traditions and spiritualities since the

1990s, the notion is not, yet, according to some authors, clearly defined (Troster 2013) or understood by average Christians (Mukaria 2021). A short history of the appearance of the notion will help to clarify its contemporary meaning within Christian theology.

2.1. Defining Ecotheology: Grassroots

Since L. White's Jr public conference in 1966 and the article entitled "*Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*" (1967), in which he rooted the ecological crisis in "the Western theology and Judeo-Christian theology" (Mukaria 2021, p. 17953), particularly in a certain understanding of the book of Genesis and of humans' vocation to subdue and dominate all creation (Mukaria 2021), calling theology to engage on and take some responsibility for the ecological crisis the world was seeing itself in, Christianity, and theology in particular, took steps to develop reflection on the matter, responding both biblically and theologically. By this time, the term 'ecology', coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, to describe the economies of living forms, was already being applied to the study of the interaction of living system with their environment and other systems. The stage was set for the appearance of ecotheology. Naming who, exactly, coined the word, has proved difficult, but gradually there was a growing investment of theology in ecological matters. According to Ernst Conradie, within "the Western academy, Christian ecotheology arguably emerged as an ecumenical scholarly discourse in 1970, with Frederik Elder's *Crisis in Eden*, Hugh Montefiore's *Can Man Survive?*, Paul Santmire's *Brother Earth* and Joseph Sittler's *The Ecology of Faith*, all published in that year" (Conradie 2023). For Mary C. Grey, the turning point was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) also known as the *Earth Summit*, in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, with its *Letter to the Churches*, "calling for repentance for past neglect and for re-conversion to the earth" (Grey 2005, p. 261).

Two years later, the name ecotheology appeared as the title of an important World Council of Churches volume in 1994 and, afterwards, as the title of a journal *Ecotheology*, (1996–2006). Meanwhile, in 1995, L. Boff had published *Ecology and Liberation: a New Paradigm*, drawing attention to the fact that the earth was mainly poor, had been the forgotten dimension of liberation theology, and was itself in need of liberation (Grey 2005). Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*¹ (LS), 2015, would retrieve both this image and this understanding.

According to Conradie, due to its history, ecotheology must be understood against the background of the term 'ecojustice', used in ecumenical discourse to express the need of a "comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to economic injustice, ecological degradation and the interplay between them" (Conradie 2023, p. 4).

Since the words 'ecology', 'economy' and 'ecumenical' all have in common the same Greek root 'oikos' (household), it was deemed adequate to coin the word ecotheology to express the interrelationship that can be established, based on Christian faith, between the revealed God, the Creator of all things, and the earth with all living creatures, as 'the whole household' of God. Nowadays, this ecotheology is not only an area of study within Christian theologies. Other religions have developed forms of ecotheology (Troster 2013; Aditama et al. 2023). At present, we can also witness the development of an area of studies named ecospirituality (Grey 2005; Stewart-Kroeker 2019; Steffen 2019; Gonçalves Brito 2020; Cloete 2023). The discussion of the existing link between ecotheology and ecospirituality will be addressed later in this paper.

According to Conradie, "Christian ecotheology is arguable characterized by a dual critique, namely both a Christian critique of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christian complicity in such destruction" (Conradie 2023). Each one of these critical tasks, but particularly the latter, requires a reformation or a renewed ecological approach to Christian foundations, encompassing Biblical, Systematic, Liturgical, Spiritual, Moral and Pastoral dimensions in order to update its understanding of Revelation and its implications and consequences in the present context. That requires discernment of what God is saying to the Churches through the present ecological challenges that the world is facing, and of what the effective and original contribution Christianity needs to bring to the table is in

order to find effective solutions. In the process, Christians are called to convert themselves, ever deeper, to the loving presence of God in this world and open up to interreligious and non-religious fraternal networks to face these complex ecological matters.

Within Christianity, ecotheology was developed as an area of contextual theology, dealing with the misinterpretation of biblical texts, reviewing some of existent theologies, deepening the understanding of religious visions of earth and its creatures, God's presence and salvation, human action, and ecological consequences of creation's imbalance or degradation (Mukaria 2021). The notion draws from Christian theological understandings of the Earth and all its ecosystems, seen as God's 'whole household', comprising all creatures. Christianity (but also Judaism) understands this 'household' as a reality that not only originated from God but one that he inhabits and in which he dwells, in a dynamic relationship of presence and revelation. In it, the human being occupies a particular position, and, therefore, bears unique responsibility in the status of ecological balance or unbalance of all ecosystems in the actual ecological crisis we see ourselves in and its solutions. At the same time, theological thought will emphasize the goodness of Creation and its ultimate vocation to communion with God.

The status of ecotheology in connection with theology is still debated. Some authors understand it as an interdisciplinary and ecumenical applied science that uses theological methods and approaches to study both ecological phenomena and the consequences of human action from the perspective of contemporary ecology while interpreting transcendent reality in the context of ecological systems. Under this understanding, ecotheology is part of ecology and, at the same time, belongs to theology (see Hufnagel and Mics 2023, p. 1). For others, it is a "version of contextual theology" (Mukaria 2021, p. 17953). Finally, there are those who do not consider it a sub-discipline of theology but rather a mode of theological reflection or a reform movement (see Pederick 2016, p. 3).

2.2. Ecotheology in *Laudato sí*

A number of contributions to ecotheology can be traced within Catholic Christianity before the publication, in 2015, of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato sí. On Care For Our Common Home* (LS). Nevertheless, this Encyclical Letter constituted a breakthrough within Catholicism and beyond, bringing climate change, environmental degradation, poverty and human responsibility to a new level of theological reflection and critical stance on what concerns societies in general. Meaningfully, the text is neither written nor addressed exclusively to Catholics. On the contrary, it aims "to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (Francis 2015, sct. 3), believers of whatever faith and nonbelievers alike, thus having an interreligious, ecumenical, transreligious and nonreligious horizon as a number of studies have emphasized (Stewart-Kroecker 2019; Steffen 2019; Gonçalves Brito 2020). The focus is set on the ecological problem(s) at hand, concerning all people and their welfare interconnected with the environment. Although rooted in religious faith, it aims to reach beyond credence. It is a contribution to raise awareness, propose alternative anthropological, economic and political priorities, convert mindsets, suggest concrete steps and awake all sectors of societies for the imperative pragmatic ecological change needed. Nevertheless, LS is based on a Christian theological understanding of Creation, the human being, and Christ's salvation, unfolding along Christian ecotheological lines.

2.2.1. Ecotheological Dimensions of *Laudato sí*

The several contributions that have been produced along the 20th Century, in Christian ecotheology, may be systematized into two types of hermeneutical approaches: Stewardship and Apologetical on the one side, Revisionist and Reconstructivist on the other (Mukaria 2021). The former maintains the validity of Christian Biblical and dogmatic approach, against the claims that it is responsible for human domination and exploitation of nature and its ecosystems. While acknowledging that wrong and abusive interpretations of some biblical passages were made, it keeps the importance of Biblical texts as source of Revelation,

along with practical ethical and moral consequences to ecological Christian behavior. The latter aims to review and reconstruct a Christian theology of nature, one that, although being faithful to Christian revelation, takes in consideration renewed biblical hermeneutics and actual context, assuming as a necessary part of its ecotheological understanding the need for the right ethical, moral, social and spiritual action. Either one of these two approaches ends up leading to one common conclusion: “ecotheologians view environmental crisis and degradation of eco systems as rooted in spiritual issues” (Mukaria 2021, p. 17954). A statement that Philippe Crabbé seems to subscribe when he states that “ecotheology also seeks an ortho-praxis, i.e., ways of living ecologically for a believer. The quest is not only moral; it is also spiritual” (Crabbé 2022, p. 10).

Interrelated with the two hermeneutic approaches referred to above, four ecotheological models can be identified among 20th c. Christian theology: the stewardship model, process model, the ecofeminist model and liberation ecotheology or the Ecojustice model (Mukaria 2021). According to this systematization, which, among these hermeneutical approaches and ecotheological models does the text of LS fall into?

As I read it, LS resists being simply identified with one of the hermeneutical approaches or only one of these ecotheological models. Pope Francis borrows freely from several sources and ecotheological models to compose a specific Christian understanding of the interdependence of all created beings and of human responsibilities in order to address the ecological emergence the planet faces. In broad lines, it can be argued that LS follows a stewardship hermeneutical approach, but one that acknowledges the wrongful, limited and sometimes domineering (Promethean) interpretations that have been made of some biblical passages.

LS’ theological approach on creation and humanity’s place in it is rooted in biblical narratives, interpreted within Catholic Tradition, hoping to be one more voice to help interpret and transform reality (see Francis 2015, sct. 63). Taking the book of Genesis and the symbolic narratives it offers, the goodness of all creatures is emphasized, and the specific identity of man and woman, “created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness” (Francis 2015, sct. 65–66). This status confers infinite dignity to human beings. Moreover, Genesis’ biblical narratives “suggest life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself” (Francis 2015, sct. 66). The biblical notion of ‘sin’ is understood as rupture of these three vital relationships, outwardly and within man and women. Sin is the cause for distortion of the mandate to ‘have dominion’ over the earth and, what is more, to insert conflictuality in the relationships between human beings and nature (Francis 2015, sct. 66). LS clearly warns against some wrong and distorted Christian interpretations of Genesis’ passages. It plainly states:

“The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.” (Francis 2015, sct. 67)

An appropriate biblical anthropology is paramount in any Christian ecotheology for it has consequences over the understanding of human beings’ interdependence and role in their harmonious existence (Francis 2015, sct. 68). LS upholds the goodness and intrinsic

value of every creature in God's eyes as opposed to existing as completely subordinated to the good of human beings (Francis 2015, sct. 69). Each one reflects a particular presence of the Trinity in so far as it "reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness" (Francis 2015, sct. 69).

Creation means, therefore, far more than nature. It is rooted in Trinity's love and continuous action, and it is a form of God's revelation. It is grounded in "God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance" (Francis 2015, sct. 76) and is open to transcendence. God is present in each creature which is "a locus of his presence" (Francis 2015, sct. 88). A mechanist vision of nature is against a Christian ecotheology.

In *Laudato sí*, Christian ecotheology stems from and grounds an ecospirituality, for its understanding of Creation, God and the living relationships to each creature that lies at the very core of its existence cannot but be the source of a sense of dynamic identity, self-transcendence, purpose, fulfilment and ultimate meaning, i.e., a spirituality. A deep sense of spiritual communion or fraternity unfolds, bonding all elements of the ecosystems, in such a way that it allows us to consider that "every act of cruelty towards any creature is contrary to human dignity" (Francis 2015, sct. 92). This funds a shared inheritance of goods, destined to benefit everyone, not only a few.

Christ's mystery does not contradict this interdependence of all things in God's will but goes a step further. By being the Word who became flesh, One Person of the Trinity entered creation to assume in himself its reality: "the destiny of creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ" (Francis 2015, sct. 99). From incarnation to resurrection, the mystery of Christ is at work within nature, hidden but effective, respecting its autonomy while "mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end" (Francis 2015, sct. 100).

2.2.2. The Rooting of Ecological Crisis in the Human Heart

A Christian ecotheology cannot evade the mystery of sin that lies at the human heart as a paramount factor in the disruption and degradation of relationships and ecosystems. It must not silence the responsibility human beings bear in the destruction of both other human beings as well as the balance and harmonious development of all other creatures. As such, the ecotheological lines of LS address what it calls 'the human origins of the ecological crisis' (Francis 2015, sct. 101) offering an interpretation of certain human behaviors, actions and motivations that, instead of being helpful to solve the ecological crisis that humanity created, deepen its effects.

One aspect of the inability to find adequate solutions in this area is the cultural paradigm, named as 'technocratic', that drives societies in general at present, an idea Pope Francis insists on in his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate deum*, 2023 (Francis 2023, sct. 20–28). The problems such a paradigm raises are not connected with the conquests or advances of science or technology *per se* but to the domineering and powerful effect they produce over the human heart and behavior, as well as the assumption to believe that "every increase in power means an increase in progress itself, and advance in security, usefulness, welfare and vigor. . . an assimilation of new values into the stream of culture" (Francis 2015, sct. 105). Questioning the somewhat naïve straightforward connection between technological or scientific progress and development in human responsibility, values and conscience, turned into a global technocratic paradigm, LS brings attention to the inability or ethical blindness that prevents human beings from seeing "the deepest roots of our present failures which have to do with the direction, goals, meanings and social implications of technological and economic growth" (Francis 2015, sct. 109). If there is a solution to the present ecological crisis, which is generating a new kind of poverty—ecological poverty—it will have to be found by borrowing from contributions from far more fields of knowledge than just technology or science, in order to be able to grasp the whole relationships between all things. These other fields include Philosophy, Social Ethics, Education, Religion, Politics and Economy. Only developing an ecological culture, "a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational

program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (Francis 2015, sct. 111) can the world expect to find a credible solution for such a complex state of affairs.

The text of LS claims that it is an excess of anthropocentrism that stands in the way, preventing the retrieval and recovery of the social bonds that link human beings to one another and to all creatures. Christianity has had a certain blame in this state of affairs in so far as “an inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationships between human beings and the world. Often what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world (...). Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (Francis 2015, sct. 116). Again, the stewardship model is retrieved, albeit named “responsible”.

In short, LS links the need for a new ecology to the need for a new anthropology, for a renewal of our relationship to nature requires a renewal of humanity itself and a new lifestyle. In order to suggest the lines along which such renewal of humanity can be conceived and enacted, two important notions are advanced to the discussion: the notion of integral ecology and ecological conversion. I shall argue that both are relevant to a spiritual lifestyle that is the practical and existential way to live according to the ecotheological lines developed in LS.

3. Integral Ecology, Openness to New Categories

The notion of integral ecology is, probably, the most original contribution LS makes to ecotheology. It is a comprehensive and encompassing notion. At its core lies the assumption that the notion of ecology needs to be completed by means of integrating in it the human beings and all their social and cultural interactions. The link established previously between the need for a renewed relationship to nature and the need for a renewed humanity is at the core of this notion. Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, ecology needs renewal by adding to it the effects and consequences of human relationships, both upon nature and upon humanity itself, expanding beyond the strict categories of thought and praxis related to science or technology.

This implies integrating ecology, in its concerns with environmental balance or degradation, with other fields or areas of human endeavor, thus expanding the range of its concerns and search for solutions. Environment, in the context of LS, “means the relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it” (Francis 2015, sct. 139).

An integral ecology is a notion that “calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human” (Francis 2015, sct. 11). Such openness means Religion (and its theological understanding of life, nature, human beings, values and ethical responsibility) must have a roll and a say in order to help to seek adequate solutions to complex problems in which everything is related. Integral ecology must include all that is human, which dignifies and leads to human fulfillment, because what we are facing “are not two crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (Francis 2015, sct. 137). Economy, Politics, Justice, Philosophy and Religion must bring their specific contributions to such integral vision of environmental issues.

Religions, and Christianity in particular, must participate with its anthropological, ethical, spiritual and practical understanding of how to develop human and nature’s full potential. It can and must offer guidelines for a particular lifestyle, suggesting values, contemplative mindsets and behaviors, and practicality-oriented to pursue ultimate meaning while caring for all things. To support this claim, Pope Francis wrote: “When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results” (Francis 2015, sct. 160). Religions and their spiritual visions and practices are called to engage in dialogue

with Sciences, among themselves and with every other aspect of human society, for it is not only procedures and techniques that have to change to solve ecological disruption. “It is we human beings above all who need to change” (Francis 2015, sct. 202).

In this respect, Ivan Plantovnjak, while studying the implications of LS for the economy, has shown that Christian spirituality can play an important role in the economy by offering spiritual guidelines that, proposing a new lifestyle, lead to a change in the economy (Platovnjak 2019). This, in turn, affects the environment and may lead to a sustained and integral development. The call to human change as the means to find appropriate solutions to the environmental crisis will be developed in LS through the introduction of another important notion: ecological conversion (Francis 2015, sct. 210–220). By doing so, Pope Francis makes an even clearer connection between his proposal of Christian ecotheology and spirituality, in this case, Christian spirituality.

Nevertheless, nowadays, the connection between ecology (and ecotheology) and spirituality is not restricted to religious approaches or frameworks. In the last decades of the 20th c., a field of study known as ecospirituality came into existence. This is the consequence of an important change in the semantic field of spirituality that, gradually, moved out of a religious realm of meaning to a secular one. In the next paragraphs, I shall summarize briefly this significative transition in order to argue that the connection of ecology and ecotheology to ecospirituality will allow LS’ Christian ecospirituality to dialogue with and be meaningful not only to Christians or religious believers but also to all those who share an openness to spirituality.

4. From Ecotheology to Ecospirituality

Among scientific literature addressing ecological and or ecotheological matters, it is possible to find a certain number of authors who decided to study ecospirituality and the life and community projects that are implemented in connection with it (Crowe 2011; Gonçalves Brito 2020; Grey 2005; Wheeler 2022).

Understanding why and how such evolution took place requires tracing the shift of meaning that the word ‘spirituality’ has undergone throughout recent times, particularly during the 20th c. That semantic evolution also helps to explain why the notion of ecospirituality is more complex than it might appear, and why a fixed meaning or definition is difficult to obtain (see van Niekerk 2018).

4.1. ‘Spirituality’: From a Religious to a Secular Realm of Meaning

The notion of spirituality has suffered a significant change in its semantics, particularly from the 19th c. onwards. Its etymological grassroots can be found in biblical texts and in Ancient Christian writings. The most ancient reference to the term, which originated from the Latin noun ‘*Spiritualitas*’, can be traced back only to the 5th c. (Leclercq 1962), where it meant “to live a life according to the Spirit to which [the Christian] was initiated on the day of his baptism and which implies fidelity to the divine law, effort to practice the moving away from sin and attachment to God” (Leclercq 1962). With the passing of time, the meaning suffered changes and, in the 17th c., particularly in the context of Europe, the term ‘spirituality’ became identified with certain practical styles of the following of Christ, considered the result of inspirations received from the Holy Spirit in the conscience of the Christian faithful, centered on certain devotions or practices of a subjective or affective tone. With the rapid social mutations from the 17th to 19th c. the word ‘spirituality’ becomes identical to the interior life of the Christian in his/her relationship to God, particularly in what concerns the subjective, affective or mystical dimensions of such relationship. It is, therefore, a religious and, particularly, a Christian notion. By the end of the 19th c. and the beginning of the 20th c., the semantic field of this word will suffer an important transformation. Under the influence of certain philosophies and practices received from the East (India, Japan and China), “although the term still carried its biblical and medieval meaning, its semantic field was expanded beyond Christian theological and ecclesiastical discourse, to refer to the individualistic and subjective core of universal

religion” (Huss 2014). By this time, it is, still, a notion that remains in the semantic field of Religion but already not restrained to Christianity. In the second half of the 20th c. further transformations occur. Spirituality “became widely used and its semantic field changed in a radical way; new practices, institutes, and cultural products, mostly related to the New Age, came into being and were molded under the impact of this emergent new cultural category” (Huss 2014). As a consequence, “the themes encompassed in spirituality today include a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration” (Roof in Huss 2014).

As a result of this evolution, the notion of spirituality is not, presently, restricted to existential, ethical, moral and subjective practices found in Religions but has, also, a secular notion associated with a subjective and secularized achieving of human fulfillment, healing and ultimate meaning. “As spirituality has become increasingly related to realms that were previously regarded as belonging to the secular and profane, the notion that it is linked to religion—indeed, that it is perceived to be the core of religion—is fading away. The link between spirituality and the Divine (and especially, between spirituality and a personal God), which has been inherent in the use of the term since its biblical origins, does not appear in most contemporary definitions of spirituality” (Huss 2014).

Philippe Sheldrake comes to a similar conclusion. “Many people no longer see traditional religion as an adequate channel for their spiritual quest and look for new sources of self-orientation. Thus ‘spirituality’ has become an alternative way of exploring the deepest self and the ultimate purpose of life. Increasingly, the spiritual quest has moved away from outer-directed authority to inner-directed experience which is seen as more reliable” (Sheldrake 2012, p. 6). As a result, the word ‘spirituality’ can be found associated with a plurality of cultural areas beyond Religion and sometimes it is understood not only as different from but against Religion (Huss 2014; Gonçalves Brito 2020).

Whereas we still can find religious spiritualities (Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Native, Neopaganism, etc.), there is also a significant presence of esoteric spiritualities along with secular spiritualities, an expression that, in “contemporary usage is used outside explicitly religious contexts” (Sheldrake 2012). As a consequence, ‘spirituality’ can constitute a new framework of meaning to approach certain cultural areas or fields of study such as Philosophy, Psychology, Psychotherapy, Medicine, Nursing, Aesthetics and the Arts, to name but a few. Some social scientists “frequently juxtapose spirituality to religion and identify the former by what it lacks in comparison with the latter. In particular, spirituality would appear to lack institutions, authority community and even history—all of which are considered integral to religion, such as it is widely understood today” (Bender and McRoberts in Gonçalves Brito 2020, p. 313).

As a result of the evolution summarized previously, the position of spirituality in relation to religion (and therefore to theology) is complex. Some people consider spirituality as pertaining or internal to religion and to theological reflection. Others understand spirituality as a notion broader than religion (or theology), though overlapping with it in some respects. Finally, others consider spirituality distinct and apart from religion and theological reflection.

Albeit this evolution, whether spirituality is considered a religious or secular notion, there is in it a core that is shared by both approaches. That core is an anthropological vision and how it relates to the sacred (Wheeler 2022). Spirituality is a dimension of human beings’ lives that relies on an understanding of their essence, origin, identity and ultimate meaning. It may be grounded in a theological anthropology (the human being understood as being created by a God creator or origin of all things, and therefore, interconnected to all things) or it may be grounded in a non-theist or secular anthropology with a specific understanding of human identity and interconnectedness to all things and relating to a secular or immanent sacred (Gonçalves Brito 2020).

Nevertheless, both approaches share certain dimensions: they propose a set of beliefs (about humans, life, sacred, etc.), ethical values, moral behaviors, a quest for fulfillment and ultimate meaning and concrete practices, all tied together in what can be called a lifestyle

(Sheldrake 2012, p. 7). Even though each particular set of elements is not identical between them, it can be inspirational to one another and a fruitful outcome can be achieved through respectful dialogue between different spiritualities. Analyzing contemporary spirituality, Beaudoin concluded that “today’s understanding of spirituality enables people of various religious traditions—and none at all—to respect each other’s ‘journey’ of faith” (Beaudoin 2007, p. 19).

4.2. The Emergence of Ecospirituality

In light of what is said above, also the fields of ecology and ecotheology were objects of a particular ‘spiritual’ approach, resulting in the appearance of ecospirituality.

According to the semantic field from which the notion of spirituality is borrowed, religious or secular, ecospirituality will be understood and described as linked to religious (either theistic or non-theistic) or non-religious (secular) traditions, existential dimensions and practices. While for Jessica Crowe ecospirituality simply is “aspects or approaches to spirituality that relate to the environment” (Crowe 2011, p. 1), for James Wheeler the definition of ecospirituality depends on the definition of spirituality. “Spirituality is simply the way one relates to or with the sacred or the way the sacred informs one’s way of being in the world” and “ecospirituality describes how one relates to or with the sacred within the context of our natural, global and even cosmic ecosystems (or homes) of which we all form a part” (Wheeler 2022, p. 1).

The relationship between ecospirituality and ecotheology mirrors the same complex relationship that was summarized above between spirituality and religion. The main question is: what is the notion of sacred to which a certain ecospirituality relates? Is it a religious or theistic sacred? Is it a non-religious and non-theistic sacred, i.e., a secular or immanent natural sacred? Depending on the answer it will be possible to establish different kinds of relationships between the two notions.

Several authors consider that ecospirituality relates to ecotheology, either arising within it or in connection to it, but focusing on experience, spiritual awareness and practices, rather than belief arguments or rational approaches. Nonetheless, in this case, it is understood as not exclusively internal or restricted to ecotheological reflection, although it overlaps and dialogues with it (Grey 2005, p. 262; Egger 2018; Cloete 2023; Wheeler 2022, pp. 5–7). Ecospirituality, for these authors, goes beyond ecotheology but not against it. Other authors understand ecospirituality as a field distinct and separated from ecotheology or, for that matter, religion (Billet 2021, pp. 1–2).

Different forms of ecospirituality have arisen over time. Among them, we can find also Christian Ecospiritualities rooted in the retrieval of biblical hermeneutics, a stewardship model on what concerns human beings’ position in creation. With time, a “shift from anthropocentrism to an organic perspective of the valuing of all life forms in the web of life” (Grey 2005, p. 261) took place, which would set the basis for recognizing the inherent value of every form of life in itself.

The Encyclical LS proposes a Christian ecospirituality whose main lines will be summarized next.

5. Christian Ecospirituality in *Laudato si*

M. Cloete holds that “Christian ecological spirituality responds to environmental threats and injustices, and simultaneously endeavors to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew spiritual traditions in the light of our contemporary crisis” (Cloete 2023, p. 7). The text of LS unfolds along the lines of a Christian ecospirituality whose most relevant aspects are as follows.

First of all, a vision of the universe and of all reality rooted in a trinitarian personal God, Creator of all realities that, although not identical to its creatures is present in them and reveals himself through them.

Each creature is a locus of God’s presence which implies an understanding of creation as a sacrament and we should relate to it in this way (Cloete 2023, p. 10). There is a

dynamic presence of God in all creatures, animated or not. The Three Persons are active in the action of supporting all beings in existence. Human beings are created in God's image and likeness which gives them infinite dignity but that does not entitle them to dominate, tyrannize, disrupt or endanger their existence. That means their life is received as a mandate and a mission (see [Steffen 2019](#), p. 270) to be responsible stewards of creation, taking care of it, protecting it and collaborating with God so that every creature reaches its ultimate meaning and fullest potential.

Everything in creation is interconnected and its connection is God himself who, without identifying with creation, is immanent to it and dwells in it. There is a deep communion or fraternity, rooted in God, between human beings, living creatures and all other creatures. Cruelty or disruption of life against human beings or any other living creature is not only against human dignity but against their own dignity as creatures, wanted to exist by themselves and have intrinsic value.

The care for ecological and environmental harmony cannot be separated from the care for social justice and the pursuit of the common good. Among all reality, in all social contexts, the poor—among which the planet itself must be included—are those who need to be prioritized and cared for in the first place. Besides these structural aspects of LS' ecospirituality, there is another one that is singled out: the need for ecological conversion.

Ecological Conversion at the Center of LS' Ecospirituality

The centrality of conversion as a progressive transformation of mind and heart is as old as Christianity itself (see Rom. 12, 1–2) and even Judaism (see Zech. 1, 3–4). In fact, the sincere disposition to always seek a deeper wisdom and more intimate relationship with the Trinitarian God, through the relationship with every creature, lies at the center of the Christian experience, as a sincere desire to be transformed under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and produce personal and worldly change which manifests God's loving presence. As Lucciano Meddi points out "[Christian] conversion is the work of the Trinity and in particular the action of the Spirit' and 'the activation of the spiritual dynamics is important both at the time of the first conversion that is the initial adhesion to the Gospel and in the permanent and deep conversion" ([Meddi 2016](#), p. 1).

The reason for the ecological disruption, unbalance and degradation that we witness, lies, in a Christian view, at the human heart, where sin is present and active awaiting forgiveness and recreation. The origins of ecological healing coincide with the renewal of personal identity and conscience, that intimate personal place we know as self and all its complex network of affectivity, desire, relationships, reason, will and gratuity. Though it is also the result of an act of decision, conversion is always primarily rooted in God's love, mercifulness and forgiveness that precedes any human response. Such fundamental and basic love is the foundation of conversion. It is always offered, waiting for that mysterious moment where it becomes welcomed and effective in one's conscience, thus modifying human interiority, affectivity as well as rational and ethical decisions. The healing power of God's Spirit and grace must start firstly at the human heart and, then, by deeds rather than by words, is to be shared with all creatures as a mission to care and self-donate. The redemptive and regenerative power of Jesus' passion and resurrection, as a perpetual Eucharist offering, is at work, originating a new Creation of which He is the firstborn.

In fact, as Anthony J. Kelly holds, the three core doctrines of Christian faith are at the center of this ecospirituality of conversion: Trinity, Creation and Eucharist ([Kelly 2015](#)). In LS, the ecological conversion of human beings is the touchstone, "whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident' in their relationship with the world around them" ([Francis 2015](#), sct. 217). An important part of it is self-knowledge which requires acknowledging personal strengths, gifts, and values, as well as vice, faults and failures towards Creation. Particularly, it requires acknowledging "the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act" ([Francis 2015](#), sct. 218). From such wounds, we can start healing and recreating with the help of God's recreational love.

Yet, ecological conversion calls for a communitarian effort, not an individualistic one, for only in a network of communitarian work is possible to implement efficient solutions and lasting change. That is why it is also a community conversion (Francis 2015, sct. 219). A set of attitudes is linked to such a type of conversion. In the first place, there is gratitude and gratuitousness for the world received as a gift from God, which is to be responded to with generosity and good works. As Francis writes, it helps to nurture “the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light” (Francis 2015, sct. 221). Conversion is a process rather than a momentarily or temporary event. It requires that such a contemplative way of considering every single creature needs to be maintained over time. Conversion can be understood as a process of continuous personal (and cosmic) recreation. This is assumed by L. Meddi when linking the trinitarian grace of Baptism with Christian conversion, he writes: “conversion is the process of the spiritual growth of the person with whom you gradually try to imitate (discipleship) Jesus, something which is signified in the act of baptism. At the heart of conversion then we have a transformation or a new creation and not simply faith” (Meddi 2016, p. 233).

Other important attitudes relating to the ecological conversion are letting go of an obsessive consumption of goods, redefining what quality of life is, learning to enjoy and appreciate each thing and moment, and practicing “moderation and the capacity to be happy with little” (Francis 2015, sct. 222), i.e., sobriety. The use of time is also another one of the goods to which human beings need to convert. “An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator” (Francis 2015, sct. 225).

Finally, in the dynamics of ecological conversion, peace of heart and the ability to wonder and listen with serenity are paramount. “Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deep understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances?” (Francis 2015, sct. 225).

6. Christian Ecospirituality beyond Christianity

The previous elements of research allow one question to be raised: is LS’s ecospirituality a proposal meaningful or inspirational to Christians alone? In Pope Francis’ Encyclical *LS*, while discussing the importance of Biblical hermeneutics, it is stated: “A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable” (Francis 2015, sct. 75). It is certainly not acceptable to Christians and to all those who share a religious faith in a God Creator of the universe, namely Jews and Islamics, who ground universal interdependence in the act of creation *ex nihilo* from God alone.

Nevertheless, does that mean that none of the ecospiritual lines conveyed in *LS* overlap, at all, with other spiritual visions and spiritualities? Does it mean they cannot be inspirational to other people, religious or not, enabling them to contemplate themselves in deep, sacred or mystical communion with it all? The reception of Pope Francis’ *LS* by several authors (Puglisi and Buitendag 2020; Platovnjak 2019; Jamieson 2015), along with some studies analyzing its significance in ecotheological matters, seems to suggest it can be spiritually meaningful beyond Christianity. One paramount consequence of believing in a God Creator is the contemplative vision that acknowledges in every single reality a certain message and presence of God. There is a sacramental aspect of God’s presence, dwelling in every creature, actively conveying a message, in silence and service, of selfless love that can be relevant and inspirational to people who understand themselves as spiritual but not religious, or who develop particular forms of relation to an immanent sacred, even if not theistic or transcendent.

This inner, hidden and active presence of the Christian Trinitarian God as gracious and unrestricted personal love, is the foundation of all the ethical and spiritual values of compassion, solidarity affection, care, justice, active protection and liberation from all sorts of imprisonment, either of human beings or other living beings. John Chrysostom, in his book *Creation as Sacrament*, shows that the understanding of a mutual dynamic presence of created realities in God and God in all realities is already present in the writings of some Christian Fathers of the Church, namely, Clemens, Origen and Plotinus, all three from Alexandria, along with Dionysius, the Aeropagite (Chrysostom 2019).

This Christian ecotheological understanding of God inhabiting the world is an important common basis to engage in dialogue with all those who share a spirituality that relates to an immanent sacred. Elaborating on this, Zapata Muriel and Martínez Trujillo think that Christian theology's great contribution to ecotheology is the concept of *panentheism*, retrieved by L. Boff in his work, which intends to solve two fundamental problems: the presence (immanence) of God in the world and the autonomy and identity of the created realities, in themselves, thus avoiding all pantheism (Zapata Muriel and Martínez Trujillo 2018). Boff made it clear that, if adequately understood, the notion of panentheism can be compatible with Christian dogma. He wrote:

“[panentheism] is a very old and noble Christian concept that can strengthen our spirituality and enrich our theological understanding of ecology. First of all, naturally, we must remember that panentheism is quite different from pantheism. [...] [It] starts from the distinction between God and the creature, yet always maintains the relation between them. The one is not the other. Each of them has his/ her/ its own relative autonomy yet is always related. Not everything is God, but God is in everything, as we might deduce from the etymology of the word pantheism. God flows through all things; God is present in everything and makes of all reality a temple. And then, vice versa, everything is in God. We are only through God, we move only through God, because we are always in God for indeed: ‘It is in him that we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28)”. (Boff 1995, pp. 50–51)

Interestingly, in *Laudato si* the word ‘panentheism’ is absent. Probably, that is due to the fact that not all agree that panentheism is compatible with Christianity (see Renacia 2021). But does that mean that panentheism, at least a certain kind of it, is not conveyed by or implicit in that text? Some authors, analyzing some LS’ passages, answer the question in positive terms (Williams 2020; Crabbé 2022, p. 10). The issue is arguable.

The ability to contemplate a sacred presence inhabiting all realities, exactly what panentheism wishes to convey, allows a synergic and renewing dialogue among all those who see the planet, more than a ‘home’, a ‘mother’, a living organism that supports all life.

Religious or spiritual narratives that acknowledge the inner presence of the sacred as an ontological presence of life and love, supporting and uniting all, can share one essential belief with Christian ecospirituality: human beings are both physically and metaphysically embedded in nature. As a consequence, “in the realm of living beings, there is an absolute interdependence” (Puglisi and Buitendag 2020, p. 2). Due to that existential bond, responsible love, care for ecological harmony and justice, are the only credible ways to save us all while pursuing a spiritual ultimate meaning and human fulfillment.

Such interreligious and secular dialogue on ecological spiritualities can work together along the lines of the so-called seven ecological tasks of religions, namely:

“1. To interpret human condition in the framework of planetarian life; 2. Develop ecological awareness; 3. Participate in the elaboration of an environmental epistemology; 4. Promote personal, communitarian and global ecological ethics; 5. Dialogue with one another about ecological questions; 6. Act together on ecological tasks; 7. Reenchant nature: not re-mythologize (contents and values of mythologies)”. (Zapata Muriel and Martínez Trujillo 2018, p. 102)

Different Religions and Spirituality can share more than ecological tasks. They can implement ecological conversion together. Christian ecotheological vision, contemplative practices, ethical values and social interventions offer a lifestyle that can be relevant and inspirational to many non-Christians, and vice versa.

Non-Christian and non-religious or secular ecospiritualities can be synergic contributors to the creation of networks of action and meaning that can be established in order to develop a common passionate and effective protection of our world, as a drive for effective change in all realms of human intervention.

Such common ecospiritual mindset can ground what could constitute a transreligious ecological spirituality. Transreligiosity is used in this paper in the sense that Panagiotopoulos and Roussou use it: a term more apt to describe the “transgressive character of religiosity, more particularly to focus on the transversality of spaces, symbolic or otherwise”, created in religious phenomena, “which defy any strict delimitations that the institutionalized and secularizing process have sought to establish” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, pp. 614, 616). In short, “transreligiosity can be a useful single term for the dynamic of religiosity and its inherent diversity” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 627).

A transreligious ecological spirituality, can be envisioned as a powerful dynamic for ecological change, capable of bringing together religious and secular ecological spiritual visions of the human being and the world we live in, in order to protect all creatures. Pope Francis seems to have such a horizon when he writes in LS:

“The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity. [...] The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which demands patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that ‘realities are greater than ideas.’” (Francis 2015, sct. 205)

7. Conclusions

Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato si* (LS), 2015, is a text structured with an Ecotheological perspective. It takes a Christian Ecotheological stance, adopting a biblical hermeneutical of Genesis creational texts, regarding human unique position among all created things, made in God’s image and likeness, under the model of responsible stewardship. This existential quality does not allow any dominion over the earth and its creatures, but, on the contrary, care, protection, overseeing and preserving.

Due to this understanding of God, Creation and the living relationships that each creature maintains with one another, LS insists that there is an interconnectedness between all realities that is, also, an interdependence. This funds a shared inheritance of goods, destined to benefit everyone, not only a few.

Rooted in God’s creative action, a deep ontological communion or fraternity, bonding all elements of the ecosystems is affirmed. LS emphasizes that the Christian Trinitarian Personal God, Creator of all things, not identifying himself with created reality, inhabits it all, in such a way that created realities convey his message and can be contemplated as transference of his presence. Christ’s mystery does not contradict this interdependence of all things in God’s will but goes a step further. By being the Word who became flesh, One Person of the Trinity entered creation and assumed it in himself: “the destiny of creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ” (Francis 2015, sct. 99). From incarnation to resurrection, the mystery of Christ is at work within nature, hidden but effective, respecting its autonomy while “mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end” (Francis 2015, sct. 100)

LS’ ecotheology does not forget that the root of our ecological crisis lies at the heart of the human being, in the reality of sin, the untamed desire to conquer, to dominate. One of its cultural expressions is the global technocratic paradigm which naively connects technological or scientific progress and development in human responsibility, values and

conscience, while forgetting to attend to the claims of the poor, risking to generate a new kind of poverty, ecological poverty.

As such, LS holds that an ecological conversion of mind, heart and actions is urgently needed. Offering concrete guidelines to what an ecological conversion may look like, LS proposes in spirituality, one that has at its core the continuous presence of God in all things, particularly in men and women, as a source of a sense of dynamic identity, self-transcendence, redemption by love, purpose, fulfillment and ultimate meaning.

Because of this, LS conveys not only an ecotheology but also an ecospirituality. In recent years, theological and scientific studies on ecology, have been ever more focused on ecospirituality. During the 20th c., the notion of spirituality transitioned from a religious field of meaning into a secular one. Spirituality is no longer understood as the subjective, and experimental human relationship, individual and/ or communitarian, to the sacred within a Religion, Christianity or other. It has become an alternative way of exploring the deepest self and the ultimate purpose of life. The spiritual quest has moved away from outer-directed authority to inner-directed experience which is seen as more reliable, a journey of faith. The “spiritual non-religious” identity signifies that spirituality became, in many of its expressions, a relationship with an immanent or secular sacred. Accompanying this evolution, today there is a particular concern with ecospirituality. Following Wheeler, we defined ecospirituality as “how one relates to or with the sacred within the context of our natural, global and even cosmic ecosystems (or homes) of which we all form a part” (Wheeler 2022, p. 1).

Although LS proposes a Christian spirituality, we argued that its ecospiritual vision, contemplative practices, ethical values and social interventions offer a lifestyle that can be relevant and inspirational to many non-Christians. They overlap with other religious and secular spiritualities. Such a common ecospiritual mindset can ground what could constitute a transreligious ecological spirituality, where “transreligiosity can be a useful single term for the dynamic of religiosity and its inherent diversity” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 627), extending beyond religions.

Non-Christian and non-religious or secular ecospiritualities can be synergic contributors to the creation of networks of action and meaning that can be established in order to develop a common passionate and effective protection of our world, as a drive for effective change in all realms of human intervention.

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- ¹ Pope Francis Encyclical Letter *Laudato si*, 2015, is abbreviated throughout this article as LS.

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