

COMMENTARY:

Stop preaching to the converted

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Traditional moral arguments fail to persuade conservative climate sceptics. Pope Francis' gifting of his climate encyclical to President Trump prior to his leaving the Paris Agreement shows that even a religious leader's persuasive power is constrained by how his message resonates with conservative moral values.

In June 2015, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home* received considerable attention as an official Catholic document urging global climate change mitigation. As the spiritual leader of over 1 billion Catholics throughout the world, it was anticipated that Pope Francis was well-positioned to appeal to his followers' moral sensibilities and perhaps initiate broader impact given his popularity among the general public¹.

Almost two years later, on 24 May 2017, Pope Francis met with US president, Donald Trump, who on multiple occasions has expressed scepticism about the existence of climate change. The Pope gave President Trump a copy of the encyclical, presumably hoping to convince Trump to reconsider his views on climate change and his plan to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate. Optimistically, senate minority leader Chuck Schumer said, "If President Trump reads the Pope's writing, I'm confident he'll not withdraw the [Paris] agreement. We've gotta get him to read it."²

We did not share Senator Schumer's confidence. Not only was President Trump, like most Americans, unlikely to read the 40,000 word document, but our work and that of our colleagues suggests that familiarity with the encyclical was not sufficient to alter US conservatives' climate change attitudes^{3,4}. Believing that President Trump — a US president representing the conservative Republican party — would react any differently to the average conservative survey respondent represented naïve optimism with minimal empirical justification.

Unsurprisingly, a week later President Trump announced his plan to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, stating "The Paris climate accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit

of other countries, leaving American workers — who I love — and taxpayers to absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production."⁵

The importance of values

President Trump's statement stressed conservative values, citing potential job losses and concern about restrictions on business while affirming his loyalty to the American public (versus the rest of the world) and his fears that the agreement puts the US at a disadvantage compared to other foreign powers. Yet prior to President Trump's announcement, many people shared Senator Schumer's optimism that Pope Francis' moral arguments, such as his assertion that climate change disproportionately affects the poor, would change the course of the debate.

There was little reason to be so hopeful. Although *Laudato Si'* contains moral arguments with considerable empathetic appeal — couching climate-change concern in terms of care for the environment, the poor, and future generations — it lacked emphasis on appeals that would resonate with conservative moral values such as loyalty and authority. Because of this, we believe *Laudato Si'* was a missed opportunity. If Pope Francis and other climate advocates wish to persuade conservatives to embrace climate-friendly behaviours and support mitigation policies such as the Paris Agreement, they need to embrace a more strategic approach to climate communication. Specifically, they ought to demonstrate to political conservatives that acting to mitigate the effects of climate change can be consistent with conservative moral values.

Diverse cultural values

As their fundamental priorities differ, progressives and conservatives often struggle to understand each other's social

and political values^{6,7}. Moral foundations theory provides a means for understanding these differences, proposing that morality is rooted in multiple values — or foundations — that are recurring and universal but vary within individuals and across cultures⁶ (Table 1).

Importantly, people's political attitudes towards issues such as climate change are often based on their moral concerns⁸. A rapidly expanding research field has examined whether, and if so, to what extent, moral foundations influence support for various political stances^{6,7}. This research has found, for example, that US progressives are primarily concerned with issues of care and fairness, while conservatives rely on all five of the foundations⁷. One promising strategy for bridging climate-change divides, then, is to frame climate change according to the moral foundations that will resonate most with particular stakeholder groups⁸.

Environmental issues have often been framed as appeals to care (for example, harming the poor and future generations) and fairness (for example, unjustly burdening some people more than others); these foundations resonate with conservatives, but in a different way and to a lesser extent than with progressives. Effectively engaging conservatives' moral sensibilities requires appealing to a broader moral palette^{8,9}. One study, for example, found that conservatives exposed to a sanctity frame (for example, depicting environmental degradation with images of pollution and garbage) reported greater pro-environmental attitudes, more support for pro-environmental legislation, and greater belief in global warming than those exposed to a care frame⁸ (for example, images emphasizing the harm and destruction humans are causing to the land). Similar results were found when environmental issues were framed to appeal to loyalty and authority⁹.

Table 1 | Appeals to five moral foundations in the text of the encyclical.

Foundation	Definition	Examples in <i>Laudato Si'</i> (ref. 10)
Care versus harm	Concern for the suffering of others	Besides the subtitle "On Care for our Common Home", <i>Laudato Si'</i> includes many appeals to the care foundation. The effects of climate change on the poor and vulnerable are emphasized throughout the encyclical. Both decades-old arguments (for example, climate change will especially burden future generations) and newer arguments (for example, climate change will increase the number of refugees) are used to demonstrate that caring for others requires caring for the environment.
Fairness versus cheating	Concerns about equality, unfair treatment and justice	<i>Laudato Si'</i> also appeals to the fairness foundation, often in tandem with care. By juxtaposing excessive resource consumption by "the richest countries of the world" with "repercussions on the poorest areas of the world," Pope Francis suggests that climate change and its effects on the poor and vulnerable are the results of "unequal distribution of available resources".
Sanctity versus degradation	Concern for purity and sacredness, avoidance of disgust	Perhaps the most striking passage from <i>Laudato Si'</i> is also an appeal to the sanctity moral foundation: "The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth". Arrestingly blunt rhetoric such as this would be expected to elicit disgust, a crucial component of sanctity.
Loyalty versus betrayal	Concern regarding forming groups and acting for the group's greater good	Some of the arguments in <i>Laudato Si'</i> are framed as issues of loyalty and solidarity with others. Pope Francis writes about how we should "cultivate a proper relationship with [our] neighbour", citing Genesis. He also makes the important connection that caring for ourselves and nature is "inseparable from fraternity... and faithfulness to others".
Authority versus subversion	Deference to legitimate authority and respect for tradition	Pope Francis cites the teachings of well-known Catholic saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. John Paul II, to invoke their authority as widely beloved figures in the Catholic Church.

Importantly, these studies found a plausible mechanism for these effects: conservatives felt that the messages about sanctity, authority and loyalty sounded like messages from an in-group member, and they were thus more likely to support such claims⁹. Therefore, appealing to a broader network of moral foundations is a promising approach to climate communication with a sceptical, conservative audience.

Attack on conservative values

Although some of the arguments presented in the encyclical alluded to moral foundations other than care and fairness (Table 1), references to the care and fairness foundations constituted the majority of the moral language in the text^{10,11}. Furthermore, some of the moral appeals in the encyclical attacked conservative values. For instance, Pope Francis blamed multinational businesses for knowingly creating issues such as water scarcity and destruction of nature. In addition, he accused business and politics of being slow to react to important challenges and asserted that proposed technological innovation to address man-made problems may solve one problem only to create others.

For conservative readers, these confrontational passages likely overshadowed other, more positive, sentiments towards free enterprise. Indeed, opinion editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* by Vatican correspondent Francis X. Rocca and Acton Institute director Robert Sirico criticized the Pope for his "vehement

criticism of capitalism throughout the entire encyclical" and for the encyclical's "bias against free markets", respectively^{12,13}.

Why would conservatives respond otherwise? Since when have repeated reprimands persuaded bad actors to change their ways? Yes, the 'technocratic paradigm' has rightfully earned the Pope's rebukes given its role in our modern ecological crises. But that same paradigm also has the power — or, in moral foundation parlance, the authority — to take the lead in climate-change mitigation. Useful technologies such as carbon capture and storage and market solutions such as cap-and-trade hold promise as elements of a successful approach to climate change mitigation; a more effectively designed message might have challenged capitalists to embrace climate action as an opportunity to channel traditions of innovation, invoking the authority of economics in solving complex problems.

Such a message rooted in the moral value of authority might have appealed to conservative values, but the Pope dismissed innovation and economics as inefficient and insufficient, questioning whether climate change represents the ultimate failure of the technocratic paradigm. His plea is instead an urgent call for humanity to "overcome individualism" and replace it with "a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature". This is a noble ambition, but the Pope, of all people, should recognize that Rome was not built in a day. Not only do changes in human thinking occur at a pace too slow for the urgent crisis posed by

climate change, but the "new and universal solidarity" the Pope seeks cannot emerge from the ashes of individualism. In fact, individualism (that is, "liberty") has been proposed as a sixth moral foundation valued both by conservatives and progressives, albeit in different ways¹⁴.

Gaining traction for moral messages

Some might argue that it was not Pope Francis' goal to convince US conservatives to be concerned about climate change, but we disagree. We suspect that the Pope hoped to convince those who are least likely to be concerned about climate change and least likely to want to change their lifestyle in order to protect the planet, many of whom are conservative Americans. The Pope confirmed this suspicion by gifting *Laudato Si'* to President Trump in an apparent effort to salvage the United States' participation in the Paris Agreement.

But if Pope Francis and other climate advocates really wish to persuade conservative sceptics, a useful first step is to recognize that morality is multifaceted. Care and fairness are important when preaching to the converted. But messages of loyalty, sanctity, and authority resonate with conservatives at a moral level that may be less apparent to those with progressive ideologies. □

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