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A World Grappling with Pope Francis: *Laudato Si'* and the Contested Frames of a Secular-Minded Church

Joseph R. Blaney

Abstract: Pope Francis has been misunderstood by liberals and conservatives alike, confusing an emphasized pastoral tone and approach for theological departure. This confusion is exacerbated in the United States where the faithful are tempted to understand and evaluate pastoral figures in terms of secular political ideologies. This study extends Blaney's (2017) media framing study of news coverage of cardinalate appointments by examining commentary about the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* found among readers of the *National Catholic Register*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and *The New York Times*. Thematic analyses affirm that the faithful of the U.S. church succumb to the same secular parsing as the press.

Keywords: *Laudato Si'*, liberal Catholics, conservative Catholics, Pope Francis

The words "conservative" and "liberal" are used uniquely in American culture. Traditional use of the word "conservative" speaks to approaches to systems (governments, organizations, etc.) characterized by caution, less involvement, and resistance to change. Likewise, traditional use of the word "liberal" would be characterized by an embrace of change based on gathered information about need and a willingness to expend energy and resources to meet planned objectives.

However, consider the connotation of those words in the uniquely American context. Use of those terms, and their connotations, has evolved to evoke the sensibilities of the highly divergent interest groups championed by the two major political parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Neither of these organizations appear to have a consistent ideological approach to governance. Indeed, the same Democratic Party that would speak of the need to intervene in governance matters (taxation, business, environmental regulations, public schooling, etc.) speaks of choice and liberty when defending abortion rights, obscenity, and the like. Likewise, the same Republican Party that speaks of less government, school choice, and personal freedoms simultaneously opposes abortion, legal marriage equality, and due process rights. In short, the terms "conservative" and "liberal" are not accurate or helpful in contemporary politics and culture.

Taking a cue from American political nomenclature, the faithful in the United States use similar language to categorize policies and persons of Catholic/Christian note. To wit, depending on how one interprets the texts (written and spoken) of Pope Francis, he is often discussed as a progressive, revolutionary figure implementing change or alternately a conservative cleric advancing stability of church thought and teaching. Blaney (2017) found that the secular press tended to describe papal action using this ideological lens of politics. Refreshingly the Catholic press in the United States, both the "conservative" *National Catholic Register* and the "liberal" *National Catholic Reporter*, used more nuanced frames that spoke to pastoral and geographic concerns rather than the secular-political frames.

The remainder of this essay will take up a brief treatment of the perception of Pope Francis as a change agent, place *Laudato Si'* in light of previous related papal encyclicals and messages, explicate briefly the theoretical framework of media framing, offer a brief but demonstrative analysis of popular reaction to *Laudato Si'*, and discuss its relevance for future research.

Pope Francis as Change Agent

Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio, S.J., was elected pope of the Roman Catholic Church on March 13, 2013, taking the name of “Francis” (Vatican Radio, 2013). He is the first member of the Society of Jesus (commonly referred to as “The Jesuits”) to become pope. Hailing from Argentina, he is the first pope from the southern hemisphere. To say that church observers in the United States attempt, unsuccessfully, to describe his approach to church leadership as “liberal” or “conservative” might be an understatement.

David Batty’s March 13, 2013, article in *The Guardian* demonstrated the worldwide reaction to Francis’ election in terms of change from the very beginning. For instance, it cited President Barack Obama’s description of the election as marked by its potential for Latin American influence: “[A]longside millions of Hispanic Americans, those of us in the United States share the joy of this historic day” (Batty, 2013). Yet another commentator, the Bishop of Wakefield, the Rt. Rev. Stephen Platten, opined that the new pope’s background as a Jesuit brought a new approach: “It is exciting for all of us that the new Holy Father is from the New World. It is exciting too that he brings with him a profound theological background formed within the Jesuit community” (Batty, 2013). Scholarly outlets have also couched the Francis papacy in terms of its potential for change. Gilchrist (2017) found through a media ecology lens that *Laudato Si'* served as an argument for turning away from the technocratic paradigm, wherein innovation is the focus for achieving needed social ends rather than human reorientation to the earth and others. Lundgren (2017) similarly saw the new pope inside an understanding of Francis as a new manifestation of a pope in proximity to his people (a shepherd with his odorous flock, one might say). Zompetti (2017) found in Pope Francis rhetorical potential for a pope more closely connected to the poor in consonance with a church that should humble itself.

Some public opinions have formed about the pope due to his informal and off-the-cuff press conferences, such as the one where he asked, “Who am I to judge?” in response to questions about whether gay individuals could properly serve as priests. Authors such as *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat (2018) would point to comments such as these as cannon fodder for the pope’s conservative critics. Likewise, Pepinster (2020) pointed to complaints about his refusal to ordain married men and make other preferred liberal changes as evidence of his conservatism. As such, it is easy to see how commentary about his conservative/liberal (obtuse though those terms may be) strengths and shortcomings may say more about the theological orientation of the person making comment. In reality, Pope Francis has made no consequential changes to Catholic theology (indicating conservatism) while communicating about contemporary challenges in an invitational and pastoral fashion (indicating liberalism).

In this sense, the pope stands as an example of an open text ready for critical assessment. The issuance of *Laudato Si'* in 2015 by Pope Francis provides an opportunity to better understand this phenomena.

The Environment and Three Popes

As analysis will demonstrate later in this article, *Laudato Si'* has been described as a novel interest of the Catholic Church in addressing the crisis of environmental degradation. However, a simple review of the most high-profile public addresses point to a recognition by the last three popes of catastrophic damage to the planet threatening human dignity. Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis uniformly “accepted the reality of human-caused climate change and recognized it as a moral issue” (“Statements on Climate Change,” 2015). For instance, John Paul II indicated as such not once but on two different occasions for the World Day of Peace, tipping his hat to the concept that environment and justice are uniquely tied. Benedict XVI likewise expressed this view at World Day of Peace addresses but also in the 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and in other pastoral opportunities. Finally, in *Laudato Si'* (the subject of this special issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion*) Francis laid bare the scientific evidence that the earth was warming, due at least in part to human activity, with disastrous consequences to follow for every continent. The poor would be especially harmed. He likewise made clarion calls for attention to the environment in his apostolic letter, *The Joy of the Gospel*, and on many occasions to global audiences, both secular and religious (including the United Nations) (“Statements on Climate Change,” 2015). These facts exist alongside press interpretations (Yardley & Goodstein, 2015) that portend *Laudato Si'* as “sweeping” change and a departure from previous environmental communication from the institutional church.

Clearly, *Laudato Si'* was not a newfound interest by a pope with novel radical designs. Indeed, Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI expressed similar concern repeatedly in high-profile platforms. What presentation of notions about Pope Francis, then, might have led to this impression? A discussion of media framing offers an opportunity to better understand the possible explanations.

Framing

Media framing is a useful theoretical lens, and readers would surely benefit from at least a brief review of its major tenets and findings. While separate concepts, media framing is an extension of the agenda-setting hypothesis first offered by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Agenda-setting research produced much evidence that the influence of mass media lies in its ability to set a cognitive agenda or tell people what to think *about*, not necessarily what to *think* as a matter of opinion formation regarding contemporary issues and problems. As such, to the extent that a particularly defined sample of media (perhaps defined by information outlets in a particular media market or a set of outlets representative of a larger population subject to generalization) choose to cover stories related to specific sets of issues (e.g., unemployment, crime, health care) as opposed to others (e.g., water infrastructure, education funding), the news media have the influence to call attention to particular topics to the neglect of others, thereby “setting an agenda” for what the public ought to value and ponder in its elections, legislative deliberations, and other current affairs. Under this model and program of research, the news media were considered the causal force behind the subsequent interests of governing bodies and its citizens (in spite of a lack of conclusive evidence that might establish causal direction).

Cobb et al. (1976) and others improved this line of research by offering a theory of agenda-building, whereby media sources, public officials, and the populous act in a

symbiotic, complementary relationship with each other to make issues salient and important and potentially to act cooperatively toward addressing these issues. In this understanding of agenda, the influence does not necessarily begin with media outlets. Rather, the parties engage in a three-way conversation in which the interests of each are offered for consideration to varying degrees.

Goffman (1974) offered the concept of framing analysis around the theoretical assumption that all human experience is organized by the observer's attention but also by the presentations of others in our symbolically rich environments. However, the approach that emerged within media studies has been more sender-oriented. Media framing (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999) improves upon the very concept of agenda with yet more nuance. Whereas agenda-setting or -building illuminated how issue salience develops, news framing works from the assumption that within an issue of any salience, indeed at the level of a particular story on a given issue, some characteristics of the issue will be addressed while others are ignored. As such, just as a photographer will display and frame a moment by including some details in an image to the neglect of others, a journalist must choose which facts are to be published in a news story and choose value-laden words in order to describe the chosen elements within a story. This process is as applicable in a seemingly ordinary story about a school district budget meeting as it is in a controversial story about the hazardous words or provocative actions of a world leader. Regarding the subject of this essay, media frames of actions and words of Pope Francis are highly indicative of the ideological assumptions of the American news media.

For instance, Turner (2019) found that the valence of media frames turned from positive in the first three years of Pope Francis's papacy to neutral in the next three years. Conjecture of that study might indicate that as long as conflict is of journalistic value, the longer the interaction between the pope and the faithful may result in more opportunity to produce acrimony. As already noted, Blaney (2017) discovered the tendency of the secular press in the United States to frame news about Pope Francis within the framework of secular American politics. Simultaneously, the Catholic press of "both" ideological stripes differed from the secular press insofar as their stories were framed in terms of pastoral considerations rather than along the secular ideological framework. Tandoc et al. (2018) discovered similar media tendencies in the discussions of *Laudato Si'* by Fox News anchors.

As the body of work related to the media framing of Pope Francis continues to develop, the question of whether the words used by the faithful to describe Pope Francis follow suit in terms of their reactions to both secular and Catholic news stories is raised. With this in mind, the essay now turns to an examination of audience frames. As such, the following two questions are asked:

RQ1: Do reader comments on secular news sources about *Laudato Si'* reveal secular ideological frames?

RQ2: Do reader comments on Catholic news sources reveal religious-pastoral frames?

Method

Selected Texts

In order to answer the research questions, the author sought reader commentary in the form of online reactions to stories invoking *Laudato Si'* from the following outlets: *The*

New York Times to represent secular press readers, due to its status as the “newspaper of record” in the United States; the *National Catholic Reporter* to represent liberal Catholic news readers; and the *National Catholic Register* to represent conservative Catholic news readers. Note that Blaney (2017) justified these choices as representative not just by readership and reputation, but because of their statuses as either independent of church governance (*National Catholic Reporter*) or officially sponsored by the church in the United States (*National Catholic Register*). Three convenient, random samples of the first 2,000 words in these press accounts were returned by Google when searching for “Pope Francis *Laudato Si*,” plus the name of the respective outlet. Words were used as the unit of analysis rather than the number of reader letters, as the length and depth of letters varied greatly (though averaging roughly 100 words). Content generated prior to *Laudato Si*’s June 18, 2018, publication date was excluded.

Analysis of Texts

Emulating the model of the Blaney (2017) study, the texts were initially examined holistically for their general character. Following this, a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the texts took place, starting with the assumption that the researcher began with a bias about details of the frames that might be found in the differing outlets. Using critical judgment, frames were identified for commonalities in terms of particular details included and excluded.

While grounded theory begins with the supposition that the observer can set aside expectations and look for themes and patterns as they emerge in the data, this author works from the assumption that theory-free observation is not possible but can be pursued in an aspirational way. Accounting for this, the separate sets of texts from each outlet were uploaded for analysis by Leximancer software. Among other capabilities, Leximancer identifies emergent themes in the text and generates visualizations of the data. Identification of these themes would aid the author in ensuring that important emergent concepts were not overlooked while identifying frames.

Results

Discussion of the results will begin with analysis of the three outlets separately. This will allow for an integrative discussion of the natures of these texts and produce answers to our research questions.

The New York Times

It may not be surprising that a secular news source has a readership more conversant (and perhaps more inclined) to discuss the encyclical in terms of strictly secular politics. Analysis of these commentators confirms this rather obviously. For instance, one goes so far as to place political party at the center:

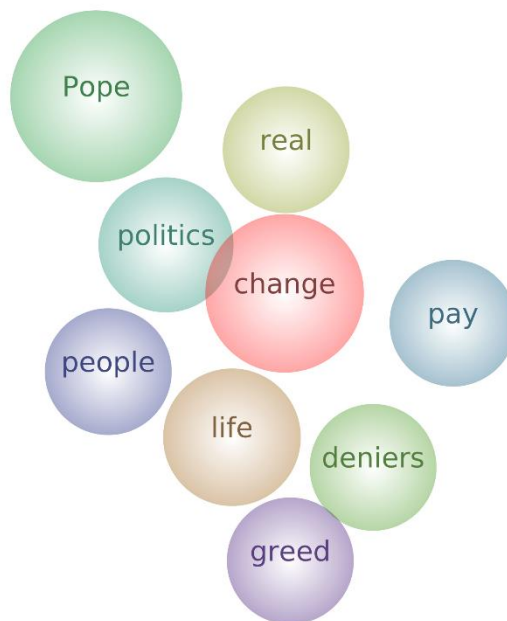
Liberals should take a lesson here on how to reframe an argument. We must stop calling them climate change deniers and start calling them “pro-pollution.” That’s what this is about. The GOP is fighting to allow corporations to pollute our country, our water, and our air.

Other comments do not invoke political party but still conform to the religious message for its secular implications: “Now we have the new Pope with his big Global Warming

Edict. Does he not know how intricately linked the Climate Change Movement is with the Eugenics movement.” These comments are representative of the collected discourse as a whole. It should be noted that the comments remained secular in nature across political ideology. In other words, “conservative” and “liberal” readers in this secular outlet had the same tendency.

The Leximancer-generated thematic analysis confirms this. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the discourse produces thematic couplings of “politics” and “change,” with themes related to climate change “deniers” and “greed” prominent as well. Notably, while references to the pope are certainly present, they are thematically separate from the secular issues discussed above and other themes visualized in Figure 1.

New York Times Themes



National Catholic Reporter

Readers of the *National Catholic Reporter*, with infrequent exception, also discussed *Landato Si'* from a secular viewpoint. For instance, there were mentions of immediate, particular natural hazards to be addressed:

We have orcas in the Puget Sound to save, not just morn [sic] at a water funeral. We have elephants in the Sudan to save, we have lions in South Africa to save, we have wolves in the states to save.

Other comments spoke to tragic natural loss:

A Syrian refugee in Amman tells me how much he misses the trees in his neighborhood, which lovingly gave him shade in his little outdoor garden. A refugee in Kampala retells of his journey through the forests of Northern Congo which gave him the safety of cover as he fled unspeakable violence.

Though certainly speaking to the struggles of humanity, comments such as these are placed in the context of secular concerns.

The Leximancer-generated thematic analysis confirms this assessment. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the discourse produces thematic couplings of terms such as “Amazon,” “change,” “climate,” and “people.” There were further themes making reference to “humans.” Notably absent were themes centering on God, the church, the pope, and any sort of reference to the divinity of creation or spiritual obligation to protect the environment, as Figure 2 visualizes.

National Catholic Reporter Themes



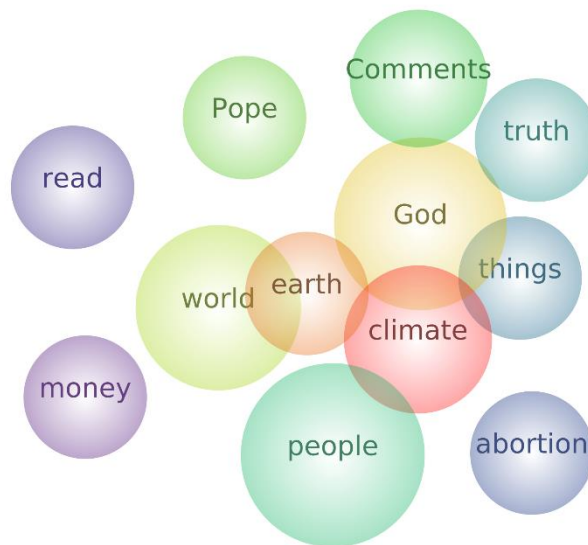
National Catholic Register

In contrast to the *National Catholic Reporter*, the *National Catholic Register* exhibited frames attendant to religious and spiritual concerns. Indeed, one reader called out an article in the outlet for not tending to such things: “I respectfully ask one question. Why is there not a single mention of God or Jesus in this article?” While this comment serves more as anecdotal evidence that the *National Catholic Register* also runs stories with strictly secular frames, reader comments such as this speak to an audience expectation of religiously oriented content. Yet another reader commented negatively on *Laudato Si’* as lacking focus on the transcendent church mission: “The encyclical is an overextended

mélange—internally inconsistent and failing to state the mission of the Church which is the salvation of souls (not the leaving of the planet in lovely condition for future generations).” Reader expressions such as these speak to a focus on the divine, religious, and spiritual.

The Leximancer-generated thematic analysis also confirms this assessment. As Figure 3 displays, the comments generated themes coupling around “God, “climate,” and “truth,” which would speak to a readership inclined to speak of *Laudato Si’* in terms of its resonance with their spiritual and religious framework. Notably the “pope” and the quintessential Catholic topic of “abortion” do emerge thematically in the comments, but curiously, they are not integrated into the more transcendent themes related to God and revealed truth.

National Catholic Register Themes



Questions Answered

Recall that this examination asked two questions:

RQ1: Do reader comments on secular news sources about *Laudato Si’* reveal secular ideological frames?

RQ2: Do reader comments on Catholic news sources reveal religious-pastoral frames?

The answer to RQ1 is a resounding “yes.” Reader comments about *Laudato Si’* coverage in *The New York Times* indicate a reading audience choosing not to interpret this patently religious document through a religious or pastoral worldview, preferring a strictly secular

ideological approach. Notably, commentary exhibited both “liberal” and “conservative” approaches.

The answer to RQ2 is more of a mixed bag. Analysis of the *National Catholic Reporter*, an erstwhile left-leaning Catholic outlet, produced reader commentary primarily employing the terminology and themes of secularism. In contrast, analysis of the *National Catholic Register*, an erstwhile right-leaning Catholic outlet, produced reader commentary primarily employing the terminology and themes of a religious worldview.

Implications for Media Framing the Church in the Press

Findings in this analysis are in part a reiteration of and in part a differentiation from what Blaney (2017) found in his framing analysis of news about the cardinalate appointments made by Pope Francis. Whereas the former study looked at news stories written and distributed by the outlets, this study examined reader commentaries (and their apparent frames and themes) on news stories produced by the outlets. There is a noticeable difference. Blaney (2017) found that the secular news sources presented frames in terms of secular ideological politics, while both the *National Catholic Reporter* and the *National Catholic Register* wrote in terms of pastoral concerns about the church. This study indicates that only the *National Catholic Register* regularly framed in terms of God, divinity, creation, and the church. One possible explanation is that the *National Catholic Register* is published under church authority, while *The New York Times* and the *National Catholic Reporter* are published independently of institutional church authority. As such, they may not be subject to the influence of the institutional church (or at least less so) and may feel license to shun religious nomenclature even when reporting on religious subjects. Scholars of religious media should turn their attention now to the question of how sponsorship (congregational, diocesan/regional, denominational) may exhibit influence over secular versus religious or pastoral presentation of news content in varying outlets. Such studies could incorporate knowledge associated with the sociology of news production (e.g., Schudson, 2011).

Future studies could also address a couple of limitations of the work presented here. First, while the outlets under study here are notable for audience and reputation, they exist as traditional standalone outlets that may be read by intentional audiences. Given the portion of news now consumed as a consequence of social media feeds, the question of extent of exposure should be explored. Myers et al. (2017) noted that audiences exposed to *Laudato Si'* and its admonitions were prompted to take action. However, as Myrick and Comfort (2019) found, true attention to action on the challenge of climate change cannot be fomented merely by the messaging of influential figures like the pope. We need a more sophisticated understanding of how messages such as *Laudato Si'* are filtered, processed, and redistributed to a larger public, which may or may not offer deference to religious authorities.

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