

Response to Julian Bourg

Colleen Mary Carpenter

I hadn't thought about how much fun it would be to read and respond to something outside of my own field—there were so many familiar issues, ideas, and even thinkers, but being approached from unexpected directions. Just so you know my starting place: I'm a theologian at a women's college, and most of my work lately has been on the intersection between ecology and theology. Issues affecting women have always been important to my work, and that tendency has been reinforced by the general ethos at St. Kate's, where focusing on how any issue affects women is expected; and my interest in ecology springs from the years I spent living in rural Minnesota, discovering that theologians have a lot to learn from farmers. I don't think I made it through more than two or three lines on any given page of Bourg's fascinating essay without circling or underlining or drawing stars or big exclamation points, scribbling in names of theologians whose ideas connected to his argument, not to mention underlining book and essay titles in the footnotes and writing "Find this and read it!" over and over. This was just great fun. Which means of course that there are dozens of things I'd like to pursue here, but since I'm sure that's true of each of you as well, I'm only going to talk about two things: the conflicted relationship between Catholicism, modernity, and women; and the perhaps equally conflicted relationship between Catholicism and science, especially with respect to what it might mean that, as Bourg argued, following *Laudato Si'*, "the Church is positioned to become a leading voice on science today."¹

¹ See above, p. 22.

Colleen Mary Carpenter is the Sister Mona Riley Endowed Professor of the Humanities at St. Catherine University. She specializes in systematic theology and her research interests include theology and ecology, especially as it relates to agriculture, climate change, and the human relationship to landscape; the religious imagination; and women's experience of God. She is the author of *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* as well as several scholarly articles including "Contemplating the Landscapes of Motherhood: The Discovery of Beauty in a Place We Thought We Knew" and "Rushing Winds and Rising Waters: Seeking the Presence of God in a Radically Changing World."

First: Catholicism, modernity, and women. In Bourg's introduction to anti-Catholic modernity, he reminded us of the two "basic theses" of the modern constitution: mastery of nature and social emancipation. As a feminist theologian, that combination struck me as fascinatingly bizarre, because each leans in such a different direction in terms of its relationship to women and ideas about women. When I hear "mastery of nature," I immediately think of Elizabeth Johnson's wonderful Madeleva Lecture, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, in which she argues that at the root of our environmental crisis [and she wrote this over 20 years ago, in 1993] is hierarchical dualism, which sets men over women and humanity over nature:

Hierarchical dualism in both its traditional and modern forms places the privileged, so-called rational man apart from and above other persons such as women, the poor, and people of color ... We need to realize that the natural environment is oppressed, manipulated, and abused in ways analogous to the patriarchal use of women ... Their exploitation has a common ideological root: men's separation from and supposed superiority to material femaleness ... Francis Bacon, a celebrated founder of modern scientific method, is one who makes the connection with women's subordination explicitly. He speaks of wresting new knowledge from nature's womb; of seizing her by the hair of her head and molding her into something new by technology; of penetrating her mysteries; of having the power to conquer and subdue her.²

So—mastery of nature: hugely problematic. But the other basic thesis of modernity, social emancipation—well, that's how first-wave feminism got started. This is a *good* thing. So the basic project of modernity, as expressed in these two theses, seems to be something that feminists should both celebrate and strongly object to, which is, as far as I can tell, pretty much how feminists do in fact speak about modernity. On the one hand, feminism itself is a product of modernity—and on the other, there are plenty of complications, including the fact that "the modern brought with it an ideal of equality grounded in fraternity [think the French Revolution] that effectively excluded women from many forms of political life."³ Push-pull. Ongoing, abiding tensions. Women and modernity. Modernity and Catholicism. And, as long as we're thinking about binaries that are deeply enmeshed and deeply conflicted, I of course end up thinking about women and Catholicism. There is no denying the ongoing tension here. For many Catholic women today, the Church is foundational to our identity and dignity and is embraced with great joy—at the same time that it also misunderstands, misrepresents, and mistreats us, which is a source of deep and abiding pain. Bourg spoke of the fact that tensions can be productive, and argues that "resources internal to Catholic traditions might usefully facilitate the encounter between Catholicism and modernity." I believe, of course, that the same might be said about Catholicism and women; and furthermore, I suspect that looking at the interplay between all three things—women, modernity, and

2 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 14–15.

3 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14.

Catholicism—could well lead to significant new insights and understandings.

Second point: Catholicism and science. Given Pope Francis’s stated commitment to dialogue between science and religion, it would have been marvelous for him to explicitly make the connection between evolution and the biblical teachings he so clearly outlined and discussed in chapter two of *Laudato Si’*. Unfortunately, he chose not to do this. Theologian Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister who has been writing about evolution and Catholic faith for many years now, praises *Laudato Si’*, especially for its “bold engagement with science,”⁴ but adds that she wishes that the pope had gone further. The encyclical, she says, “supports evolution without quite explicitly saying so.”⁵ She points to Francis’s words about God creating a world “in need of development”; a world where God limits Godself in the creation process in order to allow “new things to emerge”; and a world where God is “intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of the creature.”⁶ All of these statements are consistent with an evolutionary understanding of the universe—and yet none actually uses the word evolution.

This reluctance to explicitly speak about evolution is somewhat surprising, given that support of evolution and evolutionary ideas, including the Big Bang and the nearly 14-billion-year-old age of the universe, but perfectly consistent with previous Catholic teaching. In fact, the Big Bang theory of the origins of the universe was first proposed by a Catholic priest, George Lemaitre, in 1927.⁷ Later, in 1950, Pope Pius XII acknowledged the legitimacy of scientific research into what he called “the doctrine of evolution;”⁸ and in 1996, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this, saying that “my predecessor Pius XII has already affirmed that there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of the faith regarding man and his vocation.”⁹ In 2007, Pope Benedict argued that it was “absurd” to think that one had to choose between evolution and the Catholic understanding of creation, saying, “there are so many scientific proofs in favour of evolution which appears to be a reality we can see and which enriches our knowledge of life and being as such.”¹⁰

However, it is also true that Pope Pius, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict, while embracing the idea of evolution in general, hesitated when it came to the evolution of humanity. Each of them insisted that when it comes to human beings, there is a “special creation,” and it is not appropriate for Catholics to believe that the soul, or spirit, is

4 Ilia Delio, “Lex credendi, lex vivendi: A Response to *Laudato Si’*,” *Global Sisters Report: A project of the National Catholic Reporter*, June 30, 2015, www.globalsistersreport.org.

5 Delio, “Lex credendi.”

6 Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si’* (24 May 2015), 80, online at www.vatican.va.

7 Mark Midbon, “‘A Day Without Yesterday’: Georges LeMaitre and the Big Bang,” *Commonweal Magazine* 127:6 (March 24, 2000) 18–19.

8 Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950), 36, online at www.vatican.va.

9 John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution,” Oct. 22, 1996, paragraph 3.

10 Benedict XVI, “Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Clergy of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso,” 24 July 2007, online at www.vatican.va.

part of the evolutionary process. Human bodies have evolved, like everything else in existence—but human souls—which are not material substances, and so are not subject to evolutionary processes—were created individually by God. Pope Francis, too, follows this line of understanding, saying:

Human beings, even if we postulate a process of evolution, also possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. Each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God himself. Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God.¹¹

Evolutionary biologists, of course, would argue that the human capacities to reason, to invent, to create art *et cetera* are perfectly consistent with evolution—and Delio clearly agrees, arguing that the Church needs to take seriously what it would mean “to tell the human story as one of emergent life within cosmic history ... the story of the modern human person who has emerged slowly, over deep time, through complex levels of biological evolution.”¹² She points out that this is no small thing: it does indeed have enormous implications; it would mean rethinking our cosmology, anthropology, and eventually even our christology. It’s no wonder that popes have been rather hesitant to fully embrace evolutionary science. And yet—this is the exciting part, isn’t it? Science and theology have not yet figured out how to align themselves in this area, which means there’s work to be done, new ideas to be tested, new arguments to be made. We *are* at a point where the Church could become a leading voice on science, or more particularly on the reconciliation between science and religion. I’m excited to see where this will go.

11 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 81.

12 Delio, “Lex credendi.”