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The politics of extra/ordinary time: Encyclical thinking

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Abstract: This article reads the papal encyclical as a genre in political thought. As a form, the encyclical authorizes itself through the ontological surety provided by Christian revelation, juxtaposed with an intervention into contemporary and contested politics. As explicitly theological texts, encyclicals trouble normative notions of the political. At the same time, however, they do significant political work in the world. This article reads the genre as a form, attempting to disaggregate the theological and the political inhering within, while recognizing their inextricability. The object of the article is, thus, to reckon with the encyclical, and to take it seriously in the post-secular.

Subjects: Political History; Philosophy; Cultural Studies

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1. Introduction

In 2015, Pope Francis released his encyclical *Laudato Si* to extraordinary levels of global coverage. The text, which expressed a manifesto-like energy, was a call to arms in the issue of climate change. The encyclical was widely lauded in the mainstream press across the globe, while also being subject to criticism in the right-wing press, who accused the pope of “catastrophism”.¹ What was striking about the text’s reception, on all sides of the political spectrum, was the degree of authority accorded to the encyclical. This text was framed, obviously, in the language of Christian revelation. It took its title from a poem written by Francis of Assisi, the thirteenth-century mystic in whose honor the pope acquired his papal name. *Laudato Si*’s ethical commitments were clearly articulated within a Christian anthropology, as well as a theology of creation. And the pope’s authority to issue the said encyclical, it goes without saying, was granted to him by the Catholic Church’s investiture of him with the papal crown, which is said to bestow the petrine dispensation, unbroken since Christ said to his disciple Simon, “On this rock, you will build my church”. The mostly rapturous reception given to

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Clare Monagle is senior lecturer in the Department of History, Politics, and International Relations at Macquarie University. The author or editor of a number of books, she is broadly interested in the history of intellectuals in the Middle Ages, as well as the histories of the institutions that housed them. More particularly, she is currently engaged with the uses of gendered categories in scholastic thought between 1150 and 1520. Her work is also concerned with the “medievalism” of twentieth and twenty-first century thought, that is, the uses to which the concept of the medieval is put within definitions of modernity and progress. Her article in Cogent OA stems from this research.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article reads the papal encyclical as a genre in political thought. As a form, the encyclical authorizes itself through the ontological surety provided by Christian revelation, juxtaposed with an intervention into contemporary and contested politics. As explicitly theological texts, encyclicals trouble normative notions of the political. At the same time, however, they do significant political work in the world. This article reads the genre as a form, attempting to disaggregate the theological and the political inhering within, while recognizing their inextricability. The object of the article is, thus, to reckon with the encyclical, and to take it seriously in the post-secular.

Laudato Si seemed to pay little heed to the theological underpinnings of the work and the institution that produced it. Instead, many commentators were exultant to have ecological issues legitimized and instantiated by the pope's enormous profile and popularity. Praise was showered upon the pope's intervention in global politics, even by commentators we would assume to be highly critical of the Church and its theological commitments.

What are we to make of the encyclical as a political document, as a manifesto of sorts? Since the nineteenth-century pontificate of Leo XIII, pope's have used encyclical letters to disseminate social teachings across the globe (Coppa, 1998). Although they are ostensibly targeted at the clergy and their flock, increasingly the encyclical has been deployed as a media event, an extended press release within which a given pope can declare his agenda to the world. As far as press releases go, however, they are highly erudite missives. Each pope will not only address a social issue of their (and their retinue's) choosing, they will necessarily situate their position within the history of Catholic theology. Following interpretative protocols established during the Middle Ages, the arguments made in an encyclical will be buttressed with authorities, and peppered with biblical quotations. The trick of an encyclical is to produce policy novelty, while couching this novelty in terms of a tradition that is ancient and ontologically secure. In *Laudato si*, for example, the text reads "Christianity, in fidelity to its own identity and the rich deposit of truth which it has received from Jesus Christ, continues to reflect on these issues in fruitful dialogue with changing historical situations. In doing so, it reveals its eternal newness" (Francis, 2015). Christianity, according to *Laudato Si*, is always of and beyond the moment. Paradoxically, its novelty is eternal.

The response to *Laudato Si* reveals that these encyclicals do work in our world, they frame debates. The *gravitas* of a papal pronouncement, accompanied by the global rollout made possible by the Church's institutional scope, means that encyclicals get a traction that very few political documents can attain. They are not, however, normatively political texts. They do not presume a sphere that we can cordon off as that pertaining to governance, or the civic, or to the public. They refuse to sanction the core discursive frames of the political in modernity, those of separation of powers, or of the idea of the public sphere, or, the primacy of the sovereign state. Or rather, encyclicals only sanction those ideas in as much as they can contribute to the flourishing of the Christian ideals that they seek to enunciate. They are staunchly political documents in that they seek explicitly to make an intervention into public debate. They are not, however, political in a more conventional sense in that they explicitly yoke their intervention to that which lies outside of history, the possibility of eternal life through Christian faith.

In what follows, I will perform a reading of the multi-temporality of encyclical thought, suggesting that scholars of the political take them seriously as works of political thought, even when the documents might themselves disavow that category. The reason I want to make the case for encyclicals as important political thought is not only because of the scale of their dissemination and their high degree of erudition. More broadly, as scholars working within the post-secular, I think we have a duty to engage with the frameworks that condition the way a given community of belief may indeed be experiencing or making the political. As Hent deVries and Lawrence Sullivan wrote in 2009,

The modern critique of religious conviction—focused on theological truth and normative claims by churches, councils or charismatic leaders, which sought to speak about the ordering of society with unanswerable authority and in universal terms—now appears utterly misplaced. (deVries & Sullivan, 2009, p. x)

Rather than repudiating religious thought on empirical or scientific grounds, De Vries and Sullivan suggest that a much more productive approach is to attempt to take its temperature, to make sense of the internal logics that obtain within a religious system. This is the spirit in which I offer my thoughts on (a) the reasons that Catholic thought has been so difficult to capture in narratives of the modern, and (b) how we might approach a text such as encyclical as a resource for thinking through what it means to be political in the post-secular.

2. Modern times and the political

The adjective “modern” designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word “modern”, “modernization”, or “modernity” appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of the fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. “Modern” is thus doubly asymmetrical, it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. (1993, p. 10)

Writing in 1991, Latour situated his now famous analysis of temporality in the wake of 1989, which he described as “The Year of Miracles”, and that of the “double debacle”. The miracles and the debacle to which he referred were the same things, the fall of the Soviet Union and the occurrence of a number of summits devoted to the global ecological crisis. For Latour, the miracle/debacle was the end of two of modernity’s most driving fantasies, that of the efficacy of the rational mastery of both bodies and nature. His miracle was not the triumph of liberal capitalism, as many commentators had it at that time, but rather the suspension of temporal verities produced by the tumult of 1989. That is, he experienced that year as one that revealed the impossibility of modernity’s claims to have beaten history. This suspension of the modern enabled, for Latour at least, a critique of periodization as an organizing principle. In his telling, to be “modern” is to fantasize a total break from proceeding ancient and medieval worlds. “Modern” demands a revolutionary abrogation of the past. Suspension of the “modern”, however, lets other histories in through the temporal crack. In crisis, the occluded past becomes a source to understand the now, and a radical resource with which to other the present.

I begin with Latour, for two reasons. The first is that I feel some humble solidarity with his evocation of the temporal crisis within which he found himself. Writing in December 2016, in the year of Brexit and Trump, we are awash with accounts of the failures of liberalism, global capitalism, democracy, and even of “facts” and “truth”. Much more locally, the title of the conference at which I first presented some of what follows, was “History and Authority: Political Vocabularies of the Modern Age”. A great many of the papers that followed were concerned with the crisis of political meaning, and the poverty of the political languages of modernity to come to terms with the new political orders. As Latour understood 1989 as a watershed, both miracle and debacle, so too does 2016 seem to have unshackled normative vocabularies and confounded common place political assumptions. The second reason I start with Latour is because of his injunction to resist the periodization of the modern as we live within crisis. That is, Latour’s provocation suggests that the sense of modernity’s failure that attends our current mood necessitates a reckoning with that which modernity has repudiated. Modernity produced itself through self-conscious supercession of the primitive, the superstitious, the religious, the feudal, the prophetic, and a great myriad others. Thinking through the failures of this supercession might be one way of getting our heads around the breakdown of our political languages (Cady & Shakman Hurd, 2010).

What does it mean to talk of supercessionary failure? Supercessionary theology, as is well known, refers to the doctrine that Christ’s coming had completed the Law, and that there thus no need for Christians to observe that Law (Nirenberg, 2015). The event of Christ’s resurrection settled the account, and rendered Jewish ritual practice unnecessary to Christian life. Within supercessionary logic, the new era is produced by a complete break with the past, by a new revelation that renders the past null and void, except as explanatory pre-history. Supercession transforms the Hebrew Bible into the Old Testament. Kathleen Biddick has written that “These Christian temporal practices insisted on identitary time, by which I mean the assumption that time can be culturally identical with itself” (2003, p. 1). Christianity named time *Anno Domini*, producing identitarian temporalities. Within this framework, all of time was contained in Christian time, there could be no other time. Instead, patristic historians such as Eusebius worked very hard to fold pagan history into Christian time. It was no coincidence, Eusebius explained, that Rome was imperial at the same time that

Christ was born, the empire facilitated the spread of Christ's message. The ideology of supercession made it necessary to colonize the entirety of history, as time belonged to the Age of Christ.

Prophets of the modern, from renaissance humanists to revolutionaries to enlightenment philosophers to the authors of manifestoes, declare their supercession of the past (Trigg, 2015). To be modern is to live in a new age, it is to have a knowledge that is transformative, a consciousness that repudiates that which came before. It is not just that history has happened, and that something has occurred. Modernity insists that something irrevocable has occurred, that a transformative rupture has split time into past and present. As it did for the early Christians, this notion of supercession—a world not only turned upside down but made new—insists on identity time. Modernity, then, is not only a temporal designation enjoyed by those who adhere to its precepts. Like early Christianity, modernity also insists that it is the only true time and that those who fail to recognize this truth are necessarily deficient and of limited subjectivity. It is no coincidence that commentators working within the frame of western modernity tend to deploy terms from the European Middle Ages to describe third-world actors and states. A most obvious and hackneyed example comes to mind, the rapidity with which Islamist terrorists are described as feudal, savage, or medieval reveals the inability of western modernity to accommodate multiple temporal perspectives. As non-moderns, they are understood within the frame of that which modernity so self-satisfyingly superceded, the excessively religious and feudal European Middle Age.

The repeated figuring of Islam and Islamism as medieval in western political discourse reveals one of modernity's temporal blindspots. All too often, Islam can only be read through stories of chronological stunting, of belonging to something earlier, of something superceded. In 2015, the Australian politician Tony Abbott (who had been recently deposed as Prime Minister), declared "All of those things that Islam has never had—a Reformation, an Enlightenment, a well-developed concept of the separation of church and state—that needs to happen".² Abbott is just one among a great many commentators who have deployed the Reformation paradigm to tell the story of what is wrong with Islam. In so doing, they reflect the pervasiveness of the west's supercessionary temporality, all histories must be made coherent with their own. Just as Eusebius had to bring together Rome and Christ, so too does Tony Abbott need to subsume Islam into the only temporal frame that he permits. None of what I am saying is new, postcolonial scholars have long explored the consequences of the politics of time in the west, particularly for those that have been classed as outside of the now, such as indigenous peoples or slaves (Fabian, 2002). I also think, however, that awareness of this temporal blindspot can be used also to look productively at another so-called "medieval" religion of global importance, that of the Catholic Church. The common place idea reprised with such banality by Tony Abbott, that the core political moments of western modernity are the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the separation of Church and State, also renders the Catholic Church as an other to modernity, as an organization in need of reform and of evolution.

The ideology of modernity has medievalising effects. Modernity's desire for total identity with time means that the medieval is always being made as a temporal repository for the non-identical. Scholars have spent much time on how these medievalising effects marginalize others, and are a part of the logic that divides the world between first and third, and between north and south (Davis & Altschul, 2009). When it comes to the Catholic Church, however, we have a set of medievalising effects that work in a very different way. Reading the Catholic Church as medieval, as bounded in a past that has been overcome, has meant that we have not always taken stock of the institution, and its leaders, within normative frames in which we consider the political. In spite of the institution's enormous wealth, prestige, and global reach, as an internationalist organization *ne plus ultra*, the pronouncements of the pope on behalf of the Catholic Church do not generally infiltrate the discourse of western political theory, as it has been normatively taught and propounded. And this does not have to be a problem, if the political can indeed be cordoned off as being of the secular, and separable from the theological. If church and state are indeed separate, then we can think of the theological as inhering in the intimate space of the private, while the political is what happens in public among citizens in the polis. Of course, however, these times do not allow that separation, nor

the fantasy of its possibility. Rather, in the post-secular in which we find ourselves, our task is to map the new forms of relationship between church and state that are in operation, and to ask whether separating those categories offers the analytical clarity we seek?

Jürgen Habermas wrote in 2008 in his definition of what it means to be in the post-secular that “I am thinking here of the fact that churches and religious organisations are increasingly ‘assuming the role of communities of interpretation’ in the public arena of secular societies” (Habermas, 2008, p. 25). At the very least, following Habermas, it is beholden upon an ostensibly secular academy to engage with these “communities of interpretation”, to understand the narratives, affective drives, and forms of logic that inhere with a given religious community. I would, however, argue against Habermas’s argument that the role taken by religious organizations, activists, and thinkers within the public arena is increasing, or has increased recently. Instead, I think the sense of crisis and anxiety that has gripped the so-called public arena of western societies has exposed the myriad ways religion has always provided psychic, narratological, and ethical resources in these societies. The difference is that these resources are not able to hide in plain sight post 9/11, as perhaps they once were. Perhaps we might suggest, riffing upon Latour, that we have never been secular. Once we might have been able to relegate the Catholic Church, as just one example, as embodying a fading past, as itself a type of relic of a thankfully eroding theological sensibility. Our current political now, however, demands that we understand the political work that religious institutions, and their accompanying affective and temporal regimes, have done in the past, and continues to do, in the present. Or as deVries and Sullivan dramatically asked

how should we approach such basic analytical and descriptive categories as its [religion’s] words, things, gestures, and powers, which offer points of entry into this elusive yet stunningly manifest phenomenon, which at once inspires and terrifies—even terrorizes—civil society, that is to say, the domain of public life, as it traverses the political, politics, and policies, whether we like it or not, for good and for ill? (2009, p. 2)

The new human rights history, as exemplified by the work of Samuel Moyn, provides one example of how things look different if we make religion generally, and the Catholic Church particularly, a category of analysis within our political histories (Moyn, 2015).³ Moyn’s work has focused upon the role played by right wing Catholic intellectuals, most notably Jacques Maritain, in the development of human rights language after the World War II. The story of human rights has often been told as a triumphalist story, one which draws a straight line from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen to the 1948 United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights. This was an account that understood rights discourse to be fundamentally liberal and liberalizing, emerging from the intellectual traditions of the enlightenment in according dignity to persons, and insisting upon equality under the law (Duranti, 2012). Human rights historians, however, have recently begun to suggest a very different set of genealogies to explain the events and language of 1948, in particular focusing upon the ways in which right-wing Catholics embraced rights language as a way to universalize their Christian understanding of the dignity of the person via the capacious possibilities of rights discourse. Maritain and Charles Malik, both of whom were integral to the drafting processes of the 1948 document, were devoted to the philosophy of Christian personalism, where they understood the value of the human person to be embedded in the dignity bestowed upon them by God. This was a movement that defined itself against the perceived excesses of liberal capitalism and communism. On the one hand, liberal capitalism debased the human person by commodifying their labor and their desires. On the other, as the personalists saw it, communism repudiated the fundamental right of an individual to confess their faith freely. Personalists understood themselves to offer a middle way between these positions. Their core political project was to insist upon the necessity of the protection of believers and their institutions. The first order task of government was to enshrine this particular freedom, that of religious belief and association. For Maritain and Malik, then, human rights language was not important as a mode to the celebration of liberal individualism or equitable social justice, but as a way of protecting freedom of faith (Whyte, 2014).

Moyn et al's excavation of the conservative Catholic history of human rights reveals just how multi-valent political languages can be at any given moment. For some, human rights is a progressive secular project, for others a profoundly conservative and theological one. In this case, religious commitments can not be cordoned off from politics, for the personalists they are the essence of a politics. Personalism was based on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and followed his *Summa Theologica* to argue that

Man is constituted a person, made for God and life eternal, before he is constituted a part of the city; and he is constituted a part of the family society before he is constituted a part of the political society. This is the origin of these primordial rights which political society must respect and which it may not injure when it requires the services of its members. (Maritain, 1947, p. 75)

For Maritain, and other personalists, the relationship between man and God is ontologically prior to the relationship between men in the realm that we call the political. The core function of the political is to protect and enable the flourishing of religious devotion and observation. The political is secondary to the theological, and exists in its service. The core human right to which Maritain and Malik were committed was the right to practice faith. In this, Maritain and Malik were committed to a Catholic vision of human person that was proudly of the Middle Ages, the period from which Catholic theologians and philosophers aggregated their intellectual sources for personalism. The core political frameworks of modernity within which philosophers tussled, the crises of modernity, did not obtain for these thinkers in the same way. They were medieval moderns, insisting upon their right to privilege their identity as Christians over their status as citizens, and arguing this from medieval sources. They operated as modern actors, but in the service of a proudly medieval vision.

A number of scholars have focused upon the implications of these new human rights histories, and have attempted to make sense of what it means for the history of this particular discourse, and the work that it was able to do in the world over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I want to suggest, however, that the example of the new human rights history is also helpful to those of us interested in the politics of periodization more generally. As I outlined above, the ideology of modernity is imbricated within a supercessionary logic that supposes transcendence of the Middle Ages, a progressive moving past into the necessary time of the now. And yet, for a great many religious political actors and thinkers within modernity, this supercession has not only not occurred, but cannot possibly occur. This is because religious time, of whatever faith, operates in multiple temporalities and on multiple axes. As such, I want to suggest here that the task of the scholar concerned with the crises of political modernity is to encounter the divergent temporalities to inform current politics, and that sit both inside and outside of the story modernity tells itself about itself. To do this, in just two examples, I am going to read the temporality of Leo XIII's epochal *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, alongside *Centesimus Annus*, issued by John Paul II in 1991.

3. Encyclical time

What Sacred Scripture teaches us about the prospects of the Kingdom of God is not without consequences for the life of temporal societies, which, as the adjective indicates, belong to the realm of time, with all that this implies of imperfection and impermanence. The Kingdom of God, being *in* the world without being *of* the world, throws light on the order of human society, while the power of grace penetrates that order and gives it life. (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991)

In 1991, John Paul issued *Centesimus Annus* to mark the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. In *Rerum Novarum*, meaning "On Revolutions", Leo XIII had deployed Thomistic theology to argue that struggle between the classes ought not be naturalized as inevitably dialectical. Rather, he suggested that a religious framework could serve to dissolve class distinctions, as all members of society could unite under a shared belief in the life beyond earth. The encyclical reads,

The things of earth cannot be understood or valued aright without taking into consideration the life to come, the life that will know no death. Exclude the idea of futurity, and forthwith the very notion of what is good and right would perish; nay, the whole scheme of the universe would become a dark and unfathomable mystery. (Leo XIII, 1891)

Rerum Novarum argued that the task of a politics was to protect the means by which individuals could prepare themselves for the afterlife. It cautioned against capitalism and socialism alike, arguing that neither system afforded adequate dignity to the individual. Capitalism preyed upon base desires and therefore offered sinful traps. Capitalism also threatened the spiritual life of the Christian worker by exhausting his body and mind through exploitative labor. Socialism, on the other hand, was also problematic as it repudiated the private space of the nuclear family, which was the location through which a spiritual life could be inculcated. As such *Rerum Novarum* argued for the necessity of trade unions, bolstered by an interventionist state that would be able to enforce fair working conditions and just wages. At the same time, the encyclical defended private property as a core political principle, as the accumulation of resources was integral to protecting the family as a stable and core unit of society. Drawing on the thirteenth-century Thomistic theology that Leo had enshrined as the Catholic intellectual framework, Leo articulated the middle-way politics that would continue to be articulated by a great number of Catholic intellectuals throughout the twentieth-century, including the aforementioned Jacques Maritain and Charles Malik.

In a great many senses, *Rerum Novarum* was a document of and for modernity. It responded to industrialization, class struggle, and revolutionary politics that would seek to wipe the slate clean and begin again. With its title, the document addressed itself to the concept of radical change and the implications of a world turning itself upside down. That is, it situated itself within crisis. The encyclical reads:

The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvelous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes. (Leo XIII, 1891)

Rerum Novarum cautions, however, against the catalyzing potential of such conditions to produce a revolutionary politics. This is because a revolutionary politics, according to the document, can only truly prosper if the revolution is that of conversion. It is only through conversion in Christ that a truly liberating future can be imagined. Socialist revolutions can only promise an unreal futurity, a set of impossible and empty promises. This is not because revolutionary impulses are not legitimate, but it is because all of things of the earth are necessarily imperfect and temporary. A true revolutionary futurity is that of “the life that will know no death”.⁴ According to *Rerum Novarum*, it is only the surrender the promise of the Christian eternal that can underscore a truly productive politics. *Rerum Novarum*, then, authorizes itself with recourse to that which is beyond time.

100 years on, in *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II reframed the arguments of *Rerum Novarum* away from the relationship between labor and capital, toward that between first and third world as the text describes them. The text gives a Fukuyama-esque end of history account of the triumph of capitalism over socialism, and poses the question as to whether developing nations should aspire to capitalism? The text answers that,

If by “capitalism” is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a “business economy”, “market economy” or simply “free economy”. (John Paul II, 1991)

The reason that John Paul II gives for this support of the free market is that this system best affords the individual the personal dignity and self-determination that will enable them to seek out their God. Of course there are myriad disclaimers in the document about the need for a strong rule of law to stem capitalism's excesses, but the overall tenor of the document breaks with the "middle way" of *Rerum Novarum*. Instead, *Centesimus Annus* declares a victory of sorts for the free market, and suggests that the best guarantee for one's spiritual freedom is their economic freedom.

The text is quick, however, to assure that "the Church offers her social teaching as an *indispensable and ideal orientation*, a teaching which, as already mentioned, recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which at the same time points out that these need to be oriented towards the common good" (John Paul II, 1991). And it is through statements such as this that we can glimpse the temporal assumptions of this document. "Since it is not an ideology, the Christian faith does not presume to imprison changing socio-political realities in a rigid schema, and it recognizes that human life is realized in history in conditions that are diverse and imperfect" (John Paul II, 1991). Encyclical thinking, following *Centesimus Annus*, is yoked to the transcendental, informed by the eternal, but taking place in human history. It is ontologically privileged, as it transcends time. For the papacy, ideology belongs to time alone, and like everything else that is in time, is a product of the fall, of post-lapsarian life. The papacy, however, belongs to time and non-time. That is, the conditions of history are necessarily mutable and imperfect, destined always to be in the perverse stasis of ongoing change. The papacy, however, understands itself to both of this world, and outside of it.

Reading *Rerum Novarum* and *Centesimus Annus* side by side, we register them both as bound in historicity, and as responding to the modern world as its authors saw it. These are, of course, deeply situated texts that to my mind are patently ideological documents, in spite of their avowal to the contrary. They are texts of modernity in as much as they seek to negotiate the worlds of industrialization, nationalism, globalism, and capitalism. But they are not concerned with saving the phenomena that is modernity. That is, these texts are not striving in defense of modernity's verities. Instead, they are reading the world through a Catholic hermeneutic that insistently contrasts the unfolding of human history with the centering absolutism of Christian revelation, and papal dispensation.

4. Conclusion

Papal encyclicals suggest that the stakes of politics are both very high and very low at the same time. They are driven by a conviction that political action is urgent because souls are at stake. Paradoxically, however, they also remind us that however much effort humans make, things of the earth are ephemeral and that to be human is to be in a state of perpetual pain and dissatisfaction. They are torn, I suppose, between Christianity's evangelical and existential aspects. It is tempting to read encyclicals more instrumentally than that, to unmask the crude politics behind their production. For example, *Rerum Novarum* was certainly deployed to bolster Catholic trade unions, over "godless" socialist trade unions. And *Centesimus Annus* represents the church in its most neoliberal moment, calling for the global flow of capital and encouraging the developing world to develop its own capitalist economies. In both cases, the papacy gave an ontological legitimacy to its own self-interest, manufacturing consent via theological means.

However, I want to suggest that what self-interest means to the Catholic is informed by what I can only call faith. These encyclicals enable a small glimpse as to how faith in revelation, accompanied by a confident transcendent futurity, orients a politics outside of what we call "modernity". Scholars such as myself, trained in the critical apparatus of the post-modern and post-structural humanities, have learnt to be very critical of claims to the pure, the transcendent, or the universal. Our default response is to unpack the ideological notions at the core of the claims. Notions of universality, for example, always exclude. When we see ideas of purity in action, we look for concomitant accounts of the defiled or the monstrous. When we hear the language of spiritual conversion we attempt to ascertain the fantasy of futurity driving the dramatic turn of a move toward God. This article is not a criticism of those approaches. In fact, in the current climate I think we need them

more than ever. As religious institution and ideas grow in stature and authority, it is perennially our task to unpack their claims and their unspoken ideological commitments.

At the same time, when dealing with faith-based politics, it behooves scholars to act in good faith. By this I mean, it is unhelpful to read religious interventions into politics as entirely instrumental, or only crudely ideological. If we do so, we cannot access the affective and the feeling dimensions of the belief that animates the politics of religion. Regarding the authors of the encyclicals that I quoted above, I have chosen to take them on their word that their idea of the beyond-time, that animates their theology, is real to them. That is, I have to accept that the Kingdom of God is as real to them as the material world in which I live is as real to me. I do not have to believe, but I believe that these documents evince serious and genuine belief. Acting in good faith, in this way, as a reader and a scholar, offers some small insight as I try to think about the stakes of the political in 2017, seven days before Trump's inauguration. It helps me to see why, for a great many people in this world, modernity's crisis is not necessarily a problem, and even something to be welcomed. They live in different times.

Returning to Francis' *Laudato Si*, the encyclical with which I began this article, I am struck by the multi-temporalities of that text. On the one hand, the encyclical declares the ecological crisis to be urgent, and the purpose of the letter to galvanize action. According to the Pope, the culprits are "power politics", "throwaway culture", and, the "techno-economic paradigm" (Francis, 2015). Francis constructs a vision of a rapacious and exploitative one percent, distracting the remainder of us with consumer goods. Human subjects are debased and shallow as a consequence, made myopic in our lust for shiny things. Modernity guzzles. The solution, according to Francis is an ecological conversion. This is not, as one might think, a conversion to the climate cause. Rather, it is a conversion to Christ that centers nature at its core. Francis writes:

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. (Francis, 2015)

Laudato Si situates the ecological crisis in the structural conditions of the present, but reads it a symptom of the existential broken-ness within which humans reside as a result of the fall. Our failure to protect the planet is absolutely, according to *Laudato Si*, a sin. This is uncomfortable language, necessarily judgmental and decisive. And yet, *Laudato Si*'s energetic exposition of the eternal is what enables its production of urgency in the present. If climate change is the result of sin, offensive to God himself, then there ought to be no hesitation in our response to the problem of our age. This is the logic of injunction in *Laudato Si*.

Denunciations of sin, even when they come from the smiling Pope Francis, are not to my taste. The concept of sin, which makes a failing ontological, does not lend itself to an inclusive and negotiated political. Instead, it would seem to reify categories of the good and the bad, the fallen and the saved, the pure and the impure. For myself, I would like to see *Laudato Si* without the God. But that would be impossible. Francis' timely ecological intervention aggregates the spiritual and the political inextricably. Encyclicals change their focus and their ideological color over time. But what stays the same is the conviction that the political in the now must serve the goal of eternal life in Christ. This is what I call encyclical thinking, but it would be just as apposite to call it encyclical feeling. It is political yes, but a political that stems from, and leads to, desire for the transcendental. I am not sure what we should do with these texts in the frame we call political theory or political thought as they seem to contravene so many of the protocols that govern admissibility in those fields. But at the same time, these texts work in this time, and we need to be wise to their operations.

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Notes

1. See *The Guardian* editorial published on 19 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/18/guardian-view-on-laudato-si-pope-francis-cultural-revolution>, accessed on 13 January 2017. On June 18, the *New York Times* glossed the entire document on their website, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/18/world/europe/encyclical-laudato-si.html>, accessed on 13 January 2017. As an example of skeptical right wing responses, see Noah Milman's article in the *The American Conservative* on 23 June 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/millman/the-laudato-si-hijacking/>, accessed on 13 January 2017.
2. The comments were reported widely, here is one example, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-09/tony-abbott-defends-controversial-2014-budget/7012190>, accessed 13 January 2017.
3. For an excellent overview of the problems and implications of Moyn's thesis, see the collection of responses to his work at *The Immanent Frame*, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/christian-human-rights/>, accessed, 13 January 2017-01-13.
4. *Rerum Novarum*, sec. 18.

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