



**POPE FRANCIS'
CLIMATE CRUSADE**
or the erosion of faith in God

A Tale of Two Encyclicals

Jaap C. Hanekamp & William M. Briggs

Colophon

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About Clintel

Climate Intelligence (Clintel) is an independent foundation informing people about climate change and climate policies. Clintel was founded in 2019 by emeritus professor of geophysics Guus Berkhout and science journalist Marcel Crok. Clintel's main objective is to generate knowledge and understanding of the causes and effects of climate change as well as the effects of climate policy on the economy and the environment.

Clintel published the World Climate Declaration, now signed by almost 2000 scientists and experts. In 2023 Clintel published the book *The Frozen Climate Views of the IPCC*, which documents serious errors and biases in the latest IPCC report.

The authors

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William M. Briggs, often referred to as the Statistician to the Stars, is a multifaceted individual with a background in statistics, philosophy, meteorology, and cryptography. Born in Detroit, he left the city when it was at its peak, which some might jokingly suggest led to its decline. Briggs holds a PhD in Mathematical Sciences and an MS in Atmospheric Physics, and has served in various roles including professor, consultant, and statistician. He is known for his work in probability and statistics, as well as his cultural commentary on various social and scientific issues, often taking a conservative stance. Briggs is a prolific writer, contributing to various publications and maintaining an active blog (<https://www.wmbriggs.com/>) where he discusses a range of topics from climate change to human nature. He is Catholic.

Summary

Pope Francis outlines his outlook on climate change in *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023). Concisely, the Pope fears that the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point because of climate change. In fact, the Pope announced in his encyclicals that there is a “global climate crisis.” We reflect on both encyclicals, though we do not assess the scientific information on climate change as such. Instead, we examine the Pope’s use and understanding of models, and delve deeper into the overarching philosophy that sustains both encyclicals. We conclude that the Pope, carelessly we believe, embraces scientism, and not science, which inadvertently weakens his position, and those that follow his scientific prescriptions. Scientism is the ideology that science alone is deemed capable of elucidating and resolving all genuine human problems, and that all human affairs can be reduced to science. Accordingly, scientism is the effort to expand science to all other fields of human affairs, even theology, and to usurp them in a reductionist fashion.

The two encyclicals reveal sure signs of scientism in several ways. First, Pope Francis shows an unquestioning allegiance to climate catastrophism as if the relevant global scientific community speaks only with one scientific voice. Climate scientism is a gross misrepresentation of what climate science is about and how results in this field, or any scientific field for that matter, should be understood. Second, by, perhaps unwittingly, embracing climate scientism, the Pope opens the door to a dialectic understanding of reality. That is: on the one hand, he unambiguously derides the current economic reality (with all its obvious flaws, to be sure) while on the other hand he naively and unreflectively supports a drive towards a regulatory reality that must oversee all fundamental

human affairs on a global scale. Because of this, and third, Pope Francis introduces and endorses the destructive utopian worldview. He plays the dystopian card of dogmatic climate catastrophism to persuade people to get on with the global transformative program of the utopian kind. Fourth, the climate scientism Pope Francis peddles stands diametrically opposed to the Christian worldview. We will show, in the final analysis, that scientism of any stripe is incommensurable with not only the Christian faith but also with science.

A half century of warnings

In comments to the opening of 2023's twenty eighth annual United Nations Conference of the Parties on global warming, now called "climate change", Pope Francis said that environmental destruction is "an offense against God."¹ This we wholeheartedly agree with.

Yet a moment's thought reveals that this statement, coming at this time, is rather curious.

Recall that this was the *twenty eighth* global warming conference, the first being convened in 1995. That first meeting took place seven years after James Hansen's dramatic warning to the American Congress that man's use of energy was driving temperatures up. Hansen's testimony came fourteen years after Britain's Royal Meteorological Society's President Kenneth Hare, echoing many of his colleagues, said in *Time* magazine that because of global *cooling*, also caused by man's energy use, that "I don't believe the world's present population is sustainable if [trends continue]".² The population in 1974 was about 4 billion. It is more than double that today.

We have therefore had a half century of warnings that man's use of energy was causing environmental destruction, at least of the atmospheric kind, with downstream effects that would become apparent, devastating, inescapable. Each successive warning said these terrible effects would occur "soon." *Soon* is, of course, a relative word. Geologically speaking, which is the best time scale with which to discuss the earth's climate, *soon* can be many human lifetimes. On the other hand, given the obvious strenuous emotions

that accompanied each year's new warning, each predicting doom "soon", it makes one wonder how much longer we must wait until considering the idea these warnings might, well, be wrong.

There are at least two separate questions here. The first is whether the climate warnings we hear almost daily are on target. The second is, even if they are right, what to do about them, if anything at all. A matched, but shockingly neglected, though just as important, *third* question is what do we do *if* the warnings are untrue?

Pope Francis obviously takes the warnings as truthful and accurate. Indeed, he wrote two papal encyclicals on the topic, *Laudato Si'* (LS) in 2015 and *Laudate Deum* (LD) in 2023. In both documents he assumed the worst: that the predictions of the ravages of global warming, now called "climate change", as delivered by scientific and policy experts, were true and certain. He did not ask the first question about whether the predictions were right; he took the answer as self-evident, or *because some scientists said so*. As a result, the focus of both his writings are devoted to exhortations on how to respond to these 'true and certain' warnings.

Superficially, the Pope's encyclicals are about science. Yet responding to warnings as such are not matters of science, and indeed that the uses to which science are put are emphatically not science. *To confuse science with what are good or bad or necessary or unnecessary decisions is scientism*, a term elaborated below. Scientism, tragically, has center stage in both

1 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/256165/pope-francis-to-cop28-environmental-destruction-is-an-offense-against-god>.

2 <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/FTMY-W1VsAEj1tB?format=jpg&name=900x900>.

encyclicals. This results in the Pope defending his solutions to climate change, e.g. the complete and global termination of all uses of fossil fuels, as science. Which is not true. We argue below that the distortion of science into scientism is part and parcel of *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*.

To be absolutely clear, any dismissal of the critique presented below as purportedly being outside the scientific consensus, which is nothing other than a fallacious appeal to the very authority which we are explicitly questioning, we reject out of hand. We also emphatically reject the much-heard false accusation that *because* of our critique, we must be in bed with the fossil fuel industry or some such. This is simply a red herring that purposely distracts from the real fault-finding we present. Before we begin, we want to show that in the realm of the Old Testament, it is justifiable to question even God's authority, let alone the Pope's or indeed anyone else's. Therefore, questioning the humdrum authority of science is more than commendable. Truly, it is a prerequisite of the science enterprise itself!

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The Story of Job

A Prolegomenon to our Critique

The Book of Job is captivating for many reasons and is an appropriate starting point of our critical reflections on Pope Francis' encyclicals. Briefly, the Book of Job is the story about a devout and extremely wealthy man who loses everything in his life, including his children, and questions the justness of his lot.

In the book, Job's friends tell Job that God *is* justified in allowing Job to suffer because of some hidden or unknown wrongdoing, and God can do whatever He likes. Job must have fallen short of some divine standard, which he should own up to, they insist. Job, contrariwise, protests openly and bitterly that his suffering is wrongful, and that God should not



have allowed it to happen. We, the readers, are unequivocally aware from the beginning of the story that Job is guiltless. So, everything that befalls him (through God's actions and Satan's malice) has nothing to do with God righting some injustice in the world through Job's suffering. Job is innocent and what happens to him is *not* a consequence of any wrongdoing on his part.

The surprise is that in the finale God resolutely affirms Job's position and repudiates that of the comforter friends! Put differently, in *opposing* God, Job is more allied with God's will than his comforters are, as God Himself makes clear. That is why God sides with Job, who opposed him, and not with the comforters, who were trying to be God's devotees. It is telling, and quite extraordinary, that in the ancient world a story was told in which an ordinary human being stood up against power, in this case even Absolute power *if* that power is devoid of Goodness only God possesses. This makes the Book of Job such a remarkable and exquisite literary work that is unparalleled in the ancient world. We intend to do the same here, obviously in a far more restricted sense and with respect to the understanding and use of science (and its modelling) and its results, and how much science should be believed, if at all, *because* authorities insist upon it. Ultimately, Job speaks openly about authority, justice, honesty, integrity and truth, even against God Himself if that is needed.

The main (and everyday) sticking points we will carry over in our assessment are that any and all empirical findings in science are up for critical analysis, no exceptions. Any and all theories and models proposed in science are up for critical analysis, no exceptions. We believe we are in the good company of Job who questioned even the Almighty, although we certainly cannot compare in any way with Job's guiltlessness. Nevertheless, Job is a man who was highly commended by God precisely because he stood up against the 'whatever-approach' of grovelling before raw and, in his case, infinite Power devoid from goodness.

We will see that science has taken the place of God, namely in the form of scientism. That might not be such a surprise in our secularized culture. People all too easily bow to perceived power and knowledge, the so-called 'expertocracy' we nowadays find everywhere. For any Pope, however, that would be a colossal non-starter, both as a man of faith but also as an intellectual leader who must be aware of the unequivocal limitations of science and the idolatrous character of replacing God with it. In this sense, the story of Job informs us also that we all could easily fall prey to the position Job's friends are in.

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Laudato Si' (2015) and Laudate Deum (2023)

The Road to Scientism

We now turn to *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*.³ As both documents are signed by Pope Francis, we take him to be the author. We take (his) language seriously and will not speculate on purported implications in the texts in terms of politics and the like. Our interest is in only the meaning of the documents themselves. Pope Francis's intent is nothing other than clear; from *Laudato Si'* (p. 4):

“More than fifty years ago, with the world teetering on the brink of nuclear crisis, Pope Saint John XXIII wrote an Encyclical which not only rejected war but offered a proposal for peace. He addressed his message *Pacem in Terris* to the entire ‘Catholic world’ and indeed ‘to all men and women of good will’. Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet. In my Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I wrote to all the members of the Church with the aim of encouraging ongoing missionary renewal. In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.”

Francis wishes to address all mankind in the face of what he sees as a global environmental decline, which is why he urgently appeals for a “new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (LS p. 12). On the same page he points at the biblical truth that the “Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us.” Overall, the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* posits that we “require a new and universal solidarity” and that we do away with “obstructionist attitudes” to

this universal governance ranging from “denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions.” And that “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (LS p. 13).

Laudate Deum is a further response by Pope Francis on what he now calls the “climate crisis”. He states that:

“Eight years have passed since I published the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, when I wanted to share with all of you, my brothers and sisters of our suffering planet, my heartfelt concerns about the care of our common home. Yet, with the passage of time, I have realized that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point. In addition to this possibility, it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc.” (LS p. 1)

Conversely, Pope Francis points at the Bible and tells us that “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). His is “the earth with all that is in it” (Deut 10:14). For this reason, he tells us that, “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev 25:23). Hence, “responsibility for

3 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home. 2015. See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* of the Holy Father Francis to all people of good will on the climate crisis. 2023. See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html.

Scientism is the ideology that science *alone* is deemed capable of elucidating and resolving all genuine human problems, and that all human affairs can be reduced to science.

God's earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world". ... At the same time, "the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible richness of God". To be wise, "we need to grasp the variety of things in their multiple relationships". ... Along this path of wisdom, it is not a matter of indifference to us that so many species are disappearing and that the climate crisis endangers the life of many other beings." (LS p. 13)

For all their good will and hopeful arguments, the two encyclicals accommodate two perspectives that are, in truth, irreconcilable. More precisely, one of the two perspectives – *scientism* – not only contradicts but also usurps, annuls, the theological perspective – *faith in God*. Notes of despair on the state of the planet as a *fixed given of unimpeachable scientific discovery* from which no escape seems possible and the notion that the "biblical tradition ... shows that ... renewal entails recovering and respecting the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator" (LS p. 52–53) exemplify this incommensurability. This contradiction in *Laudato Si'* is much more pronounced in *Laudate Deum* and reveals a more definitive tone, if that is even possible, about the purported science it invokes (with our emphasis):

"It is not possible to conceal the correlation of these global climate phenomena and the accelerated increase in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly since the mid-twentieth century. The overwhelming majority of scientists specializing in the climate support this correlation, and only a very small percentage of them seek to deny the evidence. Regrettably, the climate crisis is not exactly a matter that interests the great economic powers, whose concern is with the greatest

profit possible at minimal cost and in the shortest amount of time.

I feel obliged to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church. Yet we can no longer doubt that the reason for the unusual rapidity of these dangerous changes is a fact that cannot be concealed: the enormous novelties that have to do with unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries. Events of natural origin that usually cause warming, such as volcanic eruptions and others, are insufficient to explain the proportion and speed of the changes of recent decades. The change in average surface temperatures cannot be explained except as the result of the increase of greenhouse gases." (LD p. 4)

Firstly, it is clear that Pope Francis takes the consensus approach to climate change, which is the view that the relevant global scientific community, *scientifically*, is in agreement that climate change is mostly a human affair related to the use of fossil fuels. This is a gross misrepresentation of what climate science is about and how results in this field (or any field, for that matter) should be understood.

Secondly, Pope Francis is clearly tempted by a *scientific* understanding of the scientific endeavour. Scientism is the ideology that science *alone* is deemed capable of elucidating and resolving all genuine human problems (poverty, social inequity, climate change, warfare, pollution, food safety, the meaning of life et cetera), and that all human affairs can be reduced to science. Accordingly, scientism is the effort to expand science to all other fields of human affairs, to usurp them in a reductionist fashion.⁴

4 M. Stenmark, *Scientism. Science, Ethics and Religion*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Aldershot, England: 2001.

Concisely put: scientism is the ideology that all real knowledge can only be scientific knowledge; there is no rational, objective form of inquiry that is *not* a branch of science. If that is the case, and we argue for the Pope's scientific position in both documents, then his theological reflections are by default (and perhaps unwittingly) null and void because they are outside the realm of science, scientistically understood. Put differently, Pope Francis invokes a colossal and insoluble contradiction by embracing the ideology of scientism, which is idolatrous, that is, worshipping something or someone that is not God. Something or someone creaturely is never worthy of devotion. Only God – *Subsistent Being Itself* as the Christian tradition states – is worthy of worship.⁵ Consequently, believing that science, an all too human and thus limited endeavor, is all-encompassing in nature can only be idolatrous. We will come back to this point later.

Thirdly, Pope Francis invokes an additional contradiction when he, on the one hand, chastises the economic forces at play which he sees as detrimental to human and environmental thriving, while simultaneously and foolishly embracing a political resolution that carries well-known *yet undiscussed* risks to humanity and the environment. An example of the former is found in *Laudato Si'*:

“economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, ‘whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.’” (LS p. 41)

He explains the latter in *Laudate Deum*:

“It is not helpful to confuse multilateralism with a world authority concentrated in one person or in an elite with excessive power: ‘When we talk about the possibility of some form of world authority regulated by law, we need not necessarily think of a

personal authority’. ... We are speaking above all of ‘more effective world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty and the sure defence of fundamental human rights’. ... The issue is that they must be endowed with real authority, in such a way as to ‘provide for’ the attainment of certain essential goals. In this way, there could come about a multilateralism that is not dependent on changing political conditions or the interests of a certain few, and possesses a stable efficacy. ... It is a matter of establishing global and effective rules that can permit ‘providing for’ this global safeguarding. All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making and legitimizing those decisions, since the one put in place several decades ago is not sufficient nor does it appear effective.” (LD p. 8 – 10)

On what basis he thinks such global socio-economic and political arrangements could indeed be successful, if at all, he does not say or argue for. And he does not say how this purported one-world government, charged with making decisions on seemingly every aspect of human life, could be constrained, and kept from abusing its monumental powers. That is the missing essential requirement. This makes the Pope's critique and recommendations alarmingly whimsical. That an envisioned dystopian sequence of climate change-driven woes can only be efficiently confronted with “world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty and the sure defence of fundamental human rights” (LD, p. 8) is in fact utopian. We return to this so-called utopian dialectic later. First, we need to further our discussion on science.

5 Feser, E. 2015. *Religion and Superstition*. In: Oppy, G. *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Routledge, New York, p. 192–201.

Of Science and Climate Change of Models and Predictions

It is not easy to know what to make of the science of “climate change”, for several reasons. The most important one is that it has become next to impossible to separate actual changes in the state of the atmosphere and their known and uncertain causes and effects from the endless and constant stream of *theoretical predictions* of change, a great majority of them hyperbolic. And we are asked to take the hyperbole in earnest, because doing so at least shows moral solidarity to the environmental cause.

As a prominent example from top leadership, UN Secretary General António Guterres said in 2023 that the earth was undergoing “global boiling”, a term which he insisted be taken seriously. Yet as a *scientific* statement it is asinine, with no evidential justification of any kind. But he, like many leaders, meant us to accept his judgement as sound science, and even, or rather especially, if we know the statement is absurd. This is because “good people” accept the usefulness of absurdities in inducing panic. And they know that panic drives political action. This is ends-justify-the-means science, itself yet another form of scientism. There is, of course, the possibility that Guterres may have believed sincerely what he said about “global boiling”, but, if so, that merely makes him incompetent.

Even if you are thoroughly convinced of the theories behind global warming, it is clear “global boiling” is not yet upon us, even though some of the more fanciful theories predict catastrophes like it might someday occur. Yet since there is no “global boiling” now, Guterres seems to be relying on the predictions

of such a thing as evidence that the theory behind the predictions is true. This is an inversion of the vaunted scientific method. *In any case, Guterres is far from alone in taking predictions of calamity as proof the calamities have already occurred.* Pope Francis does so as well.

In *Laudate Deum*, the Pope begins by announcing there is a “global climate crisis.” To be sure, as with “global boiling”, some *predict* that such a crisis will occur. But this does not mean it must or will. Yet the Pope assumes the prediction is certain, infallible and without error, and therefore the predicted crisis is *already here*. This is circular reasoning, albeit tempered by many media stories which routinely claim the “end of the world.” It could be the Pope, and people like Guterres, rely on these sensationalistic stories and not on the bulk of published research. But, given the propagandistic nature of most media, that would be irresponsible in the extreme. So, we give the Pope the benefit of the doubt that he does not rely on dubious (media) sources. In point of fact, it is unclear which sources lie at the basis of the many claims the Pope makes in both encyclicals.

Many, well publicized, ravages of “climate change”, such as an increase in hurricanes or floods, have not happened, but are only *predicted* to happen. In fact, the IPCC states that for most types of extreme weather events, identifying human-caused climate change *beyond* natural variability has not happened and will likely not occur, even under the most extreme CO₂ emission scenario until sometime towards 2100!⁶ Nevertheless, it is these predictions that lead many, especially in the media and in leadership, to suppose

6 See Table 12.12 of *Climate Change Information for Regional Impact and for Risk Assessment*. In: *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1767–1926. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Chapter12.pdf.



when any untoward weather-related event occurs it must have been caused by “climate change”. Pope Francis says, “No one can ignore the fact that in recent years we have witnessed extreme weather phenomena, frequent periods of unusual heat, drought and other cries of protest on the part of the earth that are only a few palpable expressions of a silent disease that affects everyone.” (LD – p. 2)

Whether the earth can in fact cry in protest, we leave for the reader to decide. There have not been any frequent periods of *unusual* heat, and there has been no certain increase in extreme weather phenomena such as hurricanes, floods, droughts or wildfires. There has, of course, been a colossal increase in *interest* in every kind of untoward event that can be tied, however weakly, to climate. That awareness generates more future awareness, the whole building into a tsunami of commotion, where the commotion itself is taken as proof that “climate change” theories are correct.

As a benign example, consider the early days of tornado research, well before there was any interest in “climate change”. It was noticed that tornadoes seemed to be increasing in number into the modern era. What could be the cause? The dull answer is counting, not “climate change”. Historically, many tornadoes spawned where there were no eyes to record them. But as population increased and as measurement equipment became more sophisticated and filming tornadoes came more and more in the public eye, identifying and documenting tornadoes – location, speed, direction, intensity – became easier. Tornado numbers didn’t increase, but their recording did.⁷ Famously, the same thing happened with hurricane research.⁸ This does and will happen with all subjects which become interesting.

The Pope admits that not all “catastrophe[s] ought to be attributed to global climate change.” (LD – p. 2) But he says that “specific climate changes provoked

7 https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/wefo/22/3/waf997_1.xml.

8 <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1029/2007E0180001>.

He has not taken the trouble to learn that similar predictions have been made many times and have been shown to be wrong each time.

by humanity are notably heightening the probability of extreme phenomena that are increasingly frequent and intense.” (LD – p. 2) He refers to so-called attribution studies. This is where bad events, and *never* good ones, that are observed to happen, are assigned an increased probability under “climate change” *models*. Space precludes a full discussion of attribution studies here (but see these papers⁹), except to note two important things. One, the models assigning these heightened probabilities must be perfect; they must be flawless for the assigned probabilities to hold. Of course, in practice the models are far from perfect, almost always predicting higher temperatures than occur in reality and therefore they assign probabilities that are far too high.¹⁰ Two, attribution studies are *predictions*, not observations. This is a prime example of assuming predictions of calamity are taken as providing the proof that the theory behind the calamities is true.

The Pope obviously assumes global warming theory must be true: after all, why would so many scientists have made all these predictions unless the theories behind them were correct? So convinced is he that the scientists he favours are right, that he takes to bullying scientists who disagree with him. He says in *Laudate Deum* that “only a very small percentage of [scientists] seek to *deny the evidence*” (p. 4; our emphasis). He says that there is “resistance” and “confusion” among certain unnamed but clearly shady individuals, and that these (implied) bad scientists “have chosen to deride” the “facts” which he uncritically takes as true.

Demonstrating that a “fact”, which is to say a beloved scientific claim, is false is emphatically *not* derision. Showing a claim is wrong is indeed denial: *but it is the right and necessary, indeed orthodox, kind of denial*. The story of Job is illustrative here (in the restricted

sense we mentioned above). Job vehemently disagreed with the deterministic ‘theology’ of his day that calamity and disease are by definition proof of sin. (In fact, Jesus Himself emphasized this as can be read in John chapter 9 (ESV): “As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”)

As an example of predictions mistaken as observations, the Pope points to sea-level rise and melting glaciers, which “can be easily perceived by an individual in his or her lifetime, and probably in a few years many populations will have to move their homes because of these facts.” (LD – p. 2) He has not taken the trouble to learn that similar predictions have been made many times and have been shown to be wrong each time. One series of predictions deserves special attention: the melting sea-ice in the Arctic. The first time (that we can discover) the Arctic was predicted to be ice-free was in 1954. Because of a changing climate, it was predicted there would be no ice by 2004.¹¹ The ice, of course, remains to this day. Another similar prediction of an ice-free Arctic was made in 1972.¹² Many predictions, all of increasing mathematical and computerized sophistication, have been made since then. A notable one is by Peter Wadhams, who in 2014 was a professor of applied mathematics and theoretical physics at the University of Cambridge in England. He assured the world the Arctic would be clear of all ice by 2020. He was wrong.¹³ The minimum summer extent of ice stopped dropping around 2010 and has increased somewhat after that.

Now we could do the same service for all the other examples Pope Francis cites, including entire nations

9 <https://www.thegwpf.org/content/uploads/2021/04/Briggs-Climate-Attribution.pdf>.
<https://www.thegwpf.org/content/uploads/2021/10/Briggs-IPCC-Attribution.pdf>.

10 See <https://www.heritage.org/environment/report/global-warming-observations-vs-climate-models>.

11 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/23421495/1769713>.

12 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zmI0AAAAIABAj&sjid=L5wEAAAAIABAj&pg=5376,32009886>.

13 <https://barentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2014/11/expert-predicts-ice-free-arctic-2020-un-releases-climate-report-04-11>.

predicted to disappear beneath the waves but which have stubbornly remained dry. We could list many examples of serially incorrect predictions of environmental doom that have not come to pass. But the specifics of each of these failures would lead us too far afield and is anyway beside our main point of how science should be conducted and, more importantly, how it should be understood by its users.

The Pope also misunderstands the role of science and of criticism within science. Is it derision to point out that these many, increasingly alarming, predictions over the course of decades have all been wrong? And that, therefore, the theory behind the predictions is necessarily false? This is a matter of logic: correct theories will only make correct predictions. Whereas a false theory, by luck alone, can make guesses which turn out to be correct. *This means, more is needed to justify belief in theories than accurate predictions alone.* Here, however, we are not discussing accurate but *inaccurate* predictions, where it is clear the theories must be wrong.

The Pope suggests instead the desire to “ridicule” is what leads sceptical scientists to show, and publicize, the errors in leading theories. He disdains these “certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions” (LD – p. 4). Again, we ask, how can it be *unreasonable* to demonstrate conclusively that a theory is in error or should be greatly doubted? Should we not want to pursue the truth in science, wherever it leads? Scorning critiques of science is, as must be obvious by now, not how the practice of science should be conducted. Now it is true that scientists, being people and therefore subject to the same weaknesses as the rest of humanity, do not welcome criticism with any greater enthusiasm than anybody else (and perhaps even less than others). This is especially so after they have gained a certain level of status and power in controlling the direction of research and grants. But scientists must accept justified criticism or they cannot and must not be trusted.

If theories are pushed because of their political necessity, or because they align with personal desire or ideology, then the entire practice of science becomes suspect. Again, if a theory leads to a prediction that does not eventuate, then that theory has been proved wrong. It can certainly be modified,

perhaps corrected, and fixed in ways that seem right to the theory creators. But these good intentions, assuming they are good, are not proof of the old theory’s validity. Indeed, they are proof of exactly the *opposite*. Equally, proposed fixes and creations of ‘New & Improved!’ models are not proof of their validity. The only acceptable test is the empirical one: always pit model predictions against reality.

It should go without saying, but alas we must say it, that it also follows that valid and accurate criticisms do not lose their validity or accuracy because of the character or employment status of the people who bring them, or the circumstances in which the criticisms are made. No matter how a theory is proved wrong, it *is* wrong. A great many in leadership, and rulers and top or celebrity scientists, have warmly accepted the idea that falsehoods in service to a ‘greater truth’ are not only warranted but necessary – the very “planet” is imperilled. They might not tell such lies themselves, but they almost never correct these lies (i.e. “global boiling”), if they are in the “right direction” of course. Perhaps these elites believe there is no other way than lies and hyperbole to “raise awareness” among the public and thereby create an academic powerbase very few would or could contest. That this purposely utopian strategy is neither new nor exceptional, Michael Polanyi pointed out more than half a century ago when he remarked in his *Personal Knowledge* (1958):

“... Alleged scientific assertions, which are accepted as such because they satisfy moral passions, will excite these passions further, and thus lend increased convincing power to the scientific affirmations in question—and so on, indefinitely. ... Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings. Each of the two components ... takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when it is under attack.”¹⁴

Harry Prosch summarizes Polanyi’s poignant observation as the “twin devils of the *ideal of knowledge as detached objectivity* and the *ideal of action as moral perfectionism*.”¹⁵ Both play off of each other so that neither is properly addressed within their own domain. The reason for that is simple:

14 Polanyi, M. 1958. *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Routledge, London.

15 Prosch, H. 1986. *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition*. State University of New York Press.

both are by necessity flawed. That is, legitimate scientific fault-finding is deliberately and falsely rejected as immoral – such critique ostensibly hinders the ‘necessary transformation’ of society – and condemning projected climate policies is subsequently and coolly rejected as being ‘unscientific’. This ‘ghost in the graveyard’ strategy is nowadays immortalized in terms such as ‘climate denial’. Thus, in their firm and dull belief that they should and must sidestep honesty, integrity and truth, these elites *create* the very counter-reaction which they, like Pope Francis, decry.

Add to this shyness of criticism that the actual state of the atmosphere has become conflated with predictions of change. Clear separations no longer exist. Most assume something close to the worst has already happened, with only impossible depredations yet to come. This must be the case, common people reason, why else would many important people appear to be so upset. The level of emotion on display leads to the conclusion that something must justify it. Polanyi was very much aware of this dangerous and science-undermining conundrum six decades ago.

Perhaps these elites believe there is no other way than lies and hyperbole to “raise awareness” among the public and thereby create an academic powerbase very few would or could contest

The precautionary Pope the dialectic of utopia vs dystopia

Scientists imagine that no good of any kind can come from a changing atmosphere: all changes are prejudged as evil, so the story goes. Indeed, the reader will be hard pressed to discover a facet of life that has *not* been researched and proclaimed to be *negatively* susceptible to “climate change”. Whatever is bad in the world will become worse. Whatever is good will become bad. The Pope appears to endorse this idea, too, by not citing benefits from warming or an atmosphere richer in carbon dioxide (which, after water, is the *primary* source of plant food). Naturally, it could very well be that bad changes outnumber, or even outdo, good changes. But this kind of calculation is never done and frowned upon when suggested. Certainly, the Pope has not done it.

The Pope in *Laudate Deum* did say, “Certain apocalyptic diagnoses may well appear scarcely reasonable or insufficiently grounded.” (p. 4) This is a welcome note of providence. But then he immediately weakens it with: “This should not lead us to ignore the real possibility that we are approaching a critical point. Small changes can cause greater ones, unforeseen and perhaps already irreversible, due to factors of inertia.” (LD – p. 4–5) This tries to have it both ways. It might not be as bad as some of the most nervous say, the Pope agrees, but he then insists it is surely grim, because “unforeseen” problems that cannot be ignored *might* exist. Therefore, it is best to treat them as if they *do* exist. The potential size of the ostensible threat becomes proof that the threat is in fact real, or real enough, to take action against. *The seriousness of the charges is thus regarded as evidence of the charges themselves, which is a fallacy.*

The Pope, in both *Laudato Si’* and *Laudate Deum*, is clearly arguing from within the framework of precautionary thinking. Very briefly this is the ideal of a harm-free society, a castle in the air. The potential harm in question is related to human activities. Indeed, as the definition goes, when certain threats of serious or irreversible damage are brought to the fore, the precautionary principle envisions regulation to be mandatory so as to prevent such potential damage from materializing in the future. Put differently, precaution is regarded as the means to cope with the many dark sides of human history *before* these actually materialize.¹⁶

Precautionary thinking is profoundly dialectic. This is the approach in which the confrontation between two opposing grounds results in some kind of resolution: the envisioned conceivable harms of the future done by human societies can, *a priori*, be ameliorated in the present by the elites of the global society as referred to by the Pope. This means that Pope Francis is playing the dystopian card, so as to entice people to get on with the global transformative program of the utopian kind as quickly as possible. Obviously, the gloomier the dystopia is presented, the brighter the depicted utopian future seems.

Unfortunately then, and contrary to the Christian faith, *Laudato Si’* and *Laudate Deum* directly play into the utopian dialectic: “to immanentize the eschaton”, that is, the future Kingdom of God needs to be implemented right now and by human hands. Eric Voegelin famously coined this phrase, yet it is a contradiction in terms.¹⁷ Utopia, the secularized

16 Hanekamp, J.C. 2009. Neither Acceptable nor Certain – Cold War Antics for the 21st Century Precautionary Culture. *Erasmus Law Review* 2(2): 221 – 257.

17 Voegelin, E. 1952. *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

The Pope has called for powerful global governance to control the climate. If it turns out that “climate change” is not the problem which it is portrayed, it will next to be impossible to disband this global government.

Kingdom of Heaven, is nothing other than a failed empire made by fallible human hands. As one of this essay’s authors remarks: “the utopian precautionary perspective is no more than the pitiable orphan of Christian eschatology”.¹⁸ Thus, the former is the distorted echo of the latter, that is the Christian confession of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, announcing the resurrection of the dead, eternal life, and the kingdom of God. This is theologically called the *eschatological reality*, the definitive future of the world *as realized by God alone*.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Francis’ predecessor, noted that in the attempt to manufacture eschatology via utopia, the very thing Pope Francis dabbles with, “no real connection between the promise and the approaches to it” exists.¹⁹ That is to say, the assurance of some bright utopian future has no tangible real-world actionable counterparts. The idea of Utopia is a chimera that is, by definition, unrealizable. Worse, any utopian attempt annihilates the natural relationship between ideas, motives, and values on the one hand, and human action on the other, as the catholic philosopher Aurel Kolnai makes clear in his work on utopia.²⁰ The 20th century is littered with the debris and corpses of the attempts to establish utopian empires. Yet, Pope Francis is trying to have it both ways, which, again, is theologically and humanly irresolvable.

Apart from these historical, philosophical, and theological deliberations, what is ignored in all uses of precaution is the patent asymmetry of its methodology. It is indeed logically possible any unknown threat can be bad. But it is *just* as logically possible for the cures proposed for the ostensible disease to be *worse* than the disease itself. That is:

the utopian zeal to ward off the feared dystopia will spawn a different dystopia with equal, if not more, destructive qualities, is rarely or never considered by utopian elites.²¹ There is seldom any consideration of what implementing the proposed solutions will cost. For instance, in *Laudate Deum* the Pope says that political solutions that will be offered at the United Nations COP28 meeting “will allow for a decisive acceleration of energy transition”. (LD p. 12) As some proposed at that meeting, this means abandoning the use of all oil, gas, and coal in some very short period of years, even less than a decade. This is astonishing. And frightening. No person in power who has suggested this could possibly have thought through this proposal. There is instead a naive, almost blind, trust that all obstacles in moving away from fossil resources will be conquered with easily and painlessly.

Precautionary policies are routinely thought of as exogenous panaceas that can do no harm once implemented.²² This is patently false: policy is just as much fallible human technology as the purported disease. As a global church leader, the Pope must and should be aware of human sinfulness that affects *all* our doings in this world. Fallible human action takes center stage in any human endeavour. Put differently, speaking of detrimental human economic doings in the ominous wording as found in both encyclicals is a clear indication of the Pope imposing a dystopian reality on the global human community, which typifies precautionary culture. This dystopian imagery the Pope obtusely redeems with utopian expectations of “global and effective” rulemaking (but with no indications of who would oversee this powerful new globally controlling entity). Let us illustrate this with a thought experiment.

18 Hanekamp, J.C. 2015. *Utopia and Gospel: Unearthing The Good News in Precautionary Culture*. Dissertation, Tilburg University.

19 Ratzinger, J. *Eschatology and Utopia*. See <https://matiane.wordpress.com/2020/10/30/eschatology-and-utopia-by-cardinal-joseph-ratzinger/>.

20 Kolnai, A. (edited by Dunlop, F.) 1995. *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers*. Athlone, London 1995. Pierre Manent has written the introduction also found in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents* (1998).

21 Manson, N.A. 2002. Formulating the Precautionary Principle. *Environmental Ethics* 24: 263–274.

22 Cross, F.B. 1996. Paradoxical Perils of the Precautionary Principle. *Washington and Lee Law Review* 53: 851–925.

Suppose the theories behind catastrophic “climate change” are false, or wildly exaggerated. There is some evidence for this in the string of failed apocalyptic predictions. Of particular suspicion are the swelling mass of “downstream” theories, predictions of a near infinity of bad (never good) things that will happen to everything because of “climate change”. The entire world’s scientific community and most governments are heavily invested, personally, institutionally, politically, and monetarily, in all these theories. But again, we are supposing the foundational theory of runaway global warming is false (which means we don’t have to be concerned with the downstream theories, regardless if they are good or bad). There should come a point at which the error is acknowledged and the magnificent global-spanning apparatus supporting “climate change” theories is dismantled.

Yet is this even possible? Could so many people whose entire livelihoods, their entire careers, based on “climate change” admit they were wrong? It is not human nature to give up any cherished theory, even false ones, easily. Indeed, it takes herculean effort to even see contradictory evidence, because this always brings pain. The Pope has called for powerful global governance to control the climate. If it turns out that “climate change” is not the problem which it is portrayed, it will next to be impossible to disband this global government. The Pope has the responsibility in calling for its creation to provide recommendations on how to rein in this awesome power should it prove not to be needed.



Some Concluding Remarks

It is clear that Pope Francis, in his encyclicals, falls prey to the dystopian-utopian dialectic and the scientism on which this dualism thrives. This is the idolatry Pope Francis tinkers with in both his encyclicals. He desires two mutually exclusive outcomes. On the one hand, he embraces the catastrophism of climate scientism that goes hand in hand with the utopian dialectic he openly espouses, but he also wishes to be the guardian of the Catholic faith with Christ as its Sovereign. However, the Christian worldview that Pope Francis must embrace cannot be married to the ideology of scientism that by necessity closes off the empirical reality from any divine intervention as celebrated most visibly at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Ernest Gellner sums up the scientific worldview and its inconsistent credentials like no other in his *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*:

“... no privileged facts, occasions, individuals, institutions or associations. In other words, no miracles, no divine interventions and conjuring performances ... no saviours, no sacred churches or sacramental communities. All hypotheses are subject to scrutiny, all facts open to novel interpretations, and all facts subject to symmetrical laws which preclude the miraculous, the sacred occasion, the intrusion of the Other into the Mundane. ... The idea of a Message (or, indeed, a Messenger) declaring itself to be authoritative, final, and self-confirming, and hence demanding assent with menaces, is morally as well as intellectually unacceptable. ...”²³

What Gellner sketches here Pope Francis should (and will) reject most emphatically, but which he

nevertheless endorses in his encyclicals. Scientism is not only incommensurable with the faith, but it also has nothing whatsoever to do with science. The claim that scientism is true can never be a scientific claim. In fact, no scientific method can ever establish its truth. It is an indefensible ideological position very few are consciously willing to accept. As the catholic philosopher Augusto del Noce warns in his *The Crisis of Modernity* (added emphasis):

“Scientism cannot present itself to the awareness of its own advocates as a rational truth, i.e., as susceptible of an irrefutable proof. It is, literally, a resolution of the will: the resolution to accept as real only what can be verified empirically by everyone. On the other hand, it can only be presented to others as the expression of the adult age of reason, of the age when myths have vanished (even the wording of this presentation is necessary: scientism was born with the Enlightenment, in the wake of the analogy between the history of mankind and the stages in the life of an individual, which is the foundation of the idea of progress. Hence, the metaphor of the adult man). Due to this contradiction, it must be recognized as the endpoint of the rationalistic falsification of reason. It is rationalism revealing itself as a falsifying ideology. ... *the essence of scientism is hatred for religious transcendence.* ...”²⁴

Scientific knowledge *per se* does not oblige anyone to believe anything about the world and neither does it force decision-making this way or that. Climate catastrophism, however, is not science but the offspring of scientism, which should be dismissed

23 Gellner, E. 1992. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. Routledge, London.

24 Del Noce, A. 2014. *The Crisis of Modernity*. McGill-Queen's University Press. [Edited and translated by Carlo Lancellotti.]

out of hand by scientists of all stripes. Pope Francis has the further duty to repudiate scientism as it denies the divine reality of which he is an earthly representative. Put bluntly, by uncritically embracing the scientism of climate catastrophism, Pope Francis, perhaps unwittingly and most certainly unwillingly, inherently rejects the God he clearly tries to serve wholeheartedly. As said earlier, the framework of belief of Job's friends is too close for comfort for almost anyone. Nevertheless, the Catholic intellectual domicile is, fortunately, home to many faithful intellectuals Pope Francis should have called upon in his thought process towards *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*. This he should have pondered before he sent both failed encyclicals into the world.

The Christian worldview that Pope Francis must embrace cannot be married to the ideology of scientism.

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