

Integral Ecology and Ecofeminism —In Response to the Socio-Ecological Crisis

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Abstract: The sustainability of the environment, once mistakenly thought to compete with economic development. Many policy makers also address the poverty and environmental problems, such as climate change, as two separate issues. However, evidences proof that climate change and poverty are indeed intertwined. Among the poor who are impacted by climate change, women are even more vulnerable than men. This is also the case in China. In the view of this socio-ecological crisis, Pope Francis proposed the notion of integral ecology in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This article examines the ideas of this notion. The pope suggests that nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. Our treatment of the natural world is deeply tied to economic, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues. He also acknowledges the obstacles in implementing integral ecology, such as an economic system that focuses on short-term profit, a misguided anthropocentrism and the resulted misguided lifestyle, and a misinterpretation of the Scriptural

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notion that human beings are created in God's image and giving human absolute dominion over other creatures. All these need to be overcome by ecological conversion.

This article also points out that *Laudato Si'* and other Church's social teachings neglect the crucial role played by patriarchy in shaping the values and social structures that lead to human domination over creation, including women and nature. There is also a lack of gender sensitivity in Pope Francis' notion of integral ecology. Thus, ecological theology of liberation, particularly ecofeminist theology can complement this inadequacy and re-visioning integral ecology. For the sake of inter-cultural dialogue, this article also discusses the commonality between integral ecology and Chinese Confucian ecology. Both affirm the intertwined relation of human to environment or human to heaven and earth. They value a sustainable harmonious relationship between human and nature. At the end, based on integral ecology and ecofeminist theology, pastoral actions and policy responses are briefly discussed.

Keywords: socio-ecological crisis, climate change and women, integral ecology, ecofeminist theology

[摘要] 環境的可持續性，曾經被錯誤地被視為與經濟發展不相容。許多政策制定者將貧困和環境問題（例如氣候變化）作為兩個互不相干的問題來處理。然而，有證據表明，氣候變化和貧困確實是相互關連的。在受氣候變化影響下的窮人之中，女性比男性更容易受到傷害。在中國也是如此。鑑於這一社會生態危機，教宗方濟各在《願祢受讚頌》通諭中提出了整體生態學的觀點。本

文探討了這一觀點的內容。教宗指出，大自然不能被視為與我們分離的東西，也不能僅僅被視為我們生活的環境。我們對自然世界的處理與經濟、政治、社會、文化和倫理問題密切相關。他還承認實施整體生態觀的障礙，例如側重於短期利潤的經濟體系、極端的人類中心主義和由此導致的有問題的生活方式，以及某些錯誤的聖經詮釋，即人類因著是按天主的形象受創造而被賦予對其他生物的絕對統治權。這些都需要通過生態皈依來糾正和克服。

本文亦指出，《願祢受讚頌》通諭和其他教會的社會訓導，都忽視了父權主義和制度，在塑造人類統治一切受造物的價值觀和社會結構，包括對女性和大自然的控制慾望，所起的關鍵作用。教宗方濟各的整體生態觀也缺乏性別敏感性。因此，解放生態神學，特別是生態女性主義神學，可以補充這種不足和重新審視整體生態學。此外，基於跨文化對話，本文還討論了整體生態學與中國儒家生態觀的共同性。兩者都肯定了人與環境或人與天地的相互交織關係。他們重視人與自然之間可持續的和諧關係。最後，本文基於整體生態學和生態女性主義神學，簡要討論了牧民回應行動和政策應對的方向。

關鍵詞：社會生態危機、氣候變化與女性、整體生態學、生態女性主義神學

1 Introduction

In the past few decades, climate change has been one of the greatest global challenges that impact all people. It looms over all countries and threatens people with various kinds of social and environmental problems, such as food and water scarcity, increased flooding, severe droughts, scorching heatwaves, more disease, and economic loss. These consequences are unevenly felt around the world. The world's most vulnerable populations are more seriously threatened. As climate change affects everything from people's lives to their access to health care, people who do not lead a decent living could be pushed further into poverty as environmental conditions deteriorate. This is especially true for poor people living in low-income countries. Apart from deepening inequalities within a country, climate change also further stratifies international relations because some nations are more threatened by it than others. And poor countries have fewer resources to deal with the problem. Moreover, women are increasingly being seen as more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change, mainly because they represent the majority of the world's poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources.

In respond to the ecological crisis, throughout these years, the United Nations has brought world leaders together to mitigate and adapt to climate change which also leads to the worsening of poverty problem. In a number of occasions,

based on the former signed agreements, the world leaders met and tried to make climate commitment into action, in order to safeguard lives and livelihood.¹ A number of strategies and measures have been explored and proposed to slow down the deterioration of the environment, with focus on cutting down carbon dioxide emissions which is the main factor that leads to climate change. However, some political leaders view the environmental problem and poverty as two separate issues. Some leaders of the developing countries worried that these suggestions may affect economic development of their countries, thus, trying to water down the language of commitment in the agreement. In their eyes, it seems that environment protection is incompatible with development.

Religious leaders such as Pope Francis also urge for action in solving the ecological crisis and poverty problem. He calls the global failure to act on climate change “a brutal act of injustice toward the poor and future generation.” He claims that courage is needed in responding to “the increasingly desperate cries of the earth and its poor.”² In

1 The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted by 196 Parties at COP (Conference of the Parties) 21 in Paris, on 12 December 2015 and entered into force on 4 November 2016. Its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. Leaders of various countries meet regularly at COP to discuss the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

2 Lydia O’Kane, “Pope on Climate Crisis: Time is Running Out, Decisive Action Needed”, *Vatican News*, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-06/pope-declares-climate-emergency.html> [accessed 10

his social encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he suggests employing the notion of integral ecology to solve the dual problems of poverty and environment. This article examines the notion of integral ecology and the obstacles it is facing and may face. In the view of the vulnerability of women under climate change, liberation theology, with focus on ecofeminism and its commonalities as well as differences with integral ecology will be investigated. In a Chinese context, from the perspective of inter-cultural dialogue, is there commonality between integral ecology and Chinese Confucianism? Before exploring these issues, the relationship of climate change and poverty and its impact on women will be briefly delineated in order to put the discussion in context.

2 Climate Change, Poverty and Women

2.1 Climate Change and Poverty Intertwine

Climate change and poverty are inextricably linked. In the 2019 *Report on Climate Change and Poverty*, Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (2014-2019) points out that climate change threatens to undo the last 50 years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction. It could push more than 120 million more people into poverty by 2030 and will have the most severe impact in poor countries, regions, and the places poor people live and work. Extreme temperatures in many regions will leave disadvantaged

populations with food insecurity, lost incomes, and worse health. Many will have to choose between starvation and migration.³

As global temperatures and sea levels rise, the oceans acidify and precipitation patterns get rearranged, people living in poverty are the most severely impacted. This is especially true for poor people living in low-income countries as poor countries have fewer resources to deal with the problem. The world's poorest communities often live on the most fragile land, and they are often politically, socially, and economically marginalized, making them especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and difficult for them to secure decent livelihoods. For example, smallholder farmers depend on their crops for both food and income. When droughts, natural disasters, or some other climate change-related event push them off their land, they often sink deeper into poverty. Moreover, climate change is heating up the oceans far faster than land environments, destabilizing marine ecosystems, and causing fish populations to migrate. Livelihoods tied to subsistence, farmers and fishermen in developing countries who are threatened by climate change often do not have the resources to become climate resilient.

3 Philip Alston, *Climate Change and Poverty: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights* (United Nations, 2019), pp. 2-3, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3810720?ln=en> [accessed 10 April 2022]. Also see United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (HROHR), "UN Expert Condemns Failure to Address Impact of Climate Change on Poverty", UN-HROHR, 25 June 2019.

Farming and fishing are just two professions representing hundreds of millions of people worldwide.⁴ Climate change is also expensive for developing countries that have to redirect budgets to cope with environmental crises. The money spent dealing with climate change also means less money spent on health care, education, job training, and other poverty reduction initiatives.

Alston argues that economic prosperity and environmental sustainability are fully compatible but require decoupling economic well-being and poverty reduction from fossil fuel emissions. This requires robust policies at the local level to support displaced workers and ensure quality jobs. A robust social safety net will be a necessarily response to the unavoidable harms that climate change will bring. In contrast, if climate change is used to justify business-friendly policies and widespread privatization, exploitation of natural resources and global warming may be accelerated rather than prevented.⁵

2.2 Women and Climate Change Worldwide

The impact of climate change on gender is not the same. Heat waves, droughts, rising sea levels, and extreme storms disproportionately affect women. This is because women are more likely to live in poverty than men. Seventy per

4 Joe McCarthy, “Why Climate Change and Poverty Are Inextricably Linked”, *Global Citizens*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/climate-change-is-connected-to-poverty/> [accessed 10 April 2022].

5 Philip Alston, *Climate Change and Poverty*, pp. 8-9.

cent of the 1.3 billion people living in conditions of poverty are women. They are often seen as more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change because all over the world women have less access than men to resources such as land, credit, agricultural inputs, decision-making structures, information, technology, training and extension services that would enhance their capacity to adapt to climate change.⁶

Women represent a high percentage of poor communities that are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood, particularly in rural areas where they shoulder the major responsibility for household water supply and energy for cooking and heating, as well as for food security. Women have limited access to and control of environmental goods and services, less decision-making, and are not involved in the distribution of environment management benefits. Consequently, women are less able to confront climate change.

In many societies, socio-cultural norms and childcare responsibilities prevent women from migrating or seeking refuge in other places or working when a disaster hits. Such a situation is likely to put more burdens on women, such as travelling longer to get drinking water and wood for fuel. Women, in many developing countries suffer gender inequalities, with lower political and economic status and less access to basic human rights, such as land ownership,

⁶ Balgis Osman-Elasha, "Women in the Shadow of Climate Change", *UN Chronicle*, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womenin-shadow-climate-change> [accessed 10 April 2022].

decent housing, education and health. They also face violence that escalates during periods of instability. Climate change will be an added stressor that will aggravate women's vulnerability.⁷

Women's limited access to resources combined with other prevailing gender inequalities worsens women's coping and adaptive capacity. Although women and girls are key agents of change, their participation in relevant decision-making at all levels is limited, further undermining their ability to influence and shape measures designed to address climate change. In fact, international commitments to address climate change and disaster recognize the gender dimensions of climate change and disasters and call for parties to adopt a gender-responsive approach in addressing these issues.⁸

3 Impact of Climate Change in China

3.1 Climate Change and China

Asia is the most disaster-prone region in the world, and climate change has further exacerbated instability in the region. China, with its large and diverse geographical area, is

7 Osman-Elasha, "Women in the Shadow of Climate Change"; Joe McCarthy, "Understanding Why Climate Change Impacts Women More than Men", *Global Citizen*, 6 March 2020, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-climate-change-affects-women/> [accessed 10 April 2022].

8 Two examples are the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (18 March 2015) which adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Paris Climate Agreement (12 December 2015) signed by 195 countries.

vulnerable to various climate change impacts and disasters, including droughts, floods, typhoons as well as hot and cold extreme weather.

Decades of rapid industrialization in China have brought an environmental crisis, threatening the health and livelihoods of people in China, as well as global efforts to combat climate change. China is the world's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in recent years, resulting in increasingly serious air pollution. China is the world's largest coal producer and accounts for about half of coal consumed globally. Although the Chinese government banned the construction of new coal-fired power plants in 2016, new coal plants were built with new coal-power capacity more than the rest of the world combined.⁹

Carbon-intensive industries pose additional environmental challenges, including water scarcity and soil pollution. Meanwhile, like the rest of the world, China will face the growing consequences of climate change, including floods and droughts, stronger storms and more intense heat waves in the coming decades. China's average temperature and sea levels have risen faster than the global average, according to a 2020 report from China's National Climate Center.¹⁰ Some of China's coastal cities, such as Shanghai,

⁹ Global Energy Monitor and the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air, "China Dominates 2020 Coal Plant Development", *Global Energy Monitor*, February 2021, <https://globalenergymonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/China-Dominates-2020-Coal-Development.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2022].

¹⁰ "China is heating up faster than the Global Average", *Bloomberg*, 27

could be submerged if the global average temperature continues to rise. An estimated forty-three million people in China live on land that could be underwater by the end of the century if the global average temperature rises by 2°C.¹¹ Additionally, experts predict that China will experience more frequent extreme weather events, such as heavy rainfall. Every year, natural disasters kill hundreds of Chinese people and destroy millions of acres of crops. As temperatures rise, China's glaciers will continue to melt at an alarming rate, which will likely lead to more devastating floods. For example, in 2021 July, Zhengzhou battled the heaviest rain in a millennium and devastating floods that killed at least 25 people and displaced 1.24 million residents. Extreme rainfall and floods in China had paralyzed the greater Henan province.¹²

To curb emissions and stem further degradation, the Beijing government has implemented various policies, including signing the 2015 Paris climate agreement. President Xi Jinping has recognized climate change as one

August 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-27/china-is-heating-up-faster-than-the-global-average-data-shows?sref=vxSzVDP0> [accessed 15 April 2022].

- 11 Scott A, Kulp and Benjamin H. Strauss, "New Elevation Data Triple Estimates of Global Vulnerability to Sea-level Rise and Coastal Flooding", *Nature Communication* 10, 4844 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-12808-z> [accessed 15 April 2022].
- 12 Olivia Lai, "Fatal Floods in China Leave At Least 25 Dead and More Than 1 Million Residents Displaced", *Earth.org*, 22 July 2021, https://earth.org/fatal-floods-in-china-2021/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwg_iTBhDrARIsAD31b5hITDFZzGqnOEzb7wiDIROPfWlIoj0OffVCCiHla3y-SdDvHtL.SusaAgGbEALw_wcB [accessed 15 April 2022].

of his administration's top concerns, and Beijing has made a variety of pledges to address it. These include: achieving carbon neutrality by 2060; reaching peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030; having renewable energy sources account for 25 percent of total energy consumption by 2030; reducing carbon intensity, or the amount of carbon emitted per unit of GDP, by more than 65 percent by 2030; installing enough solar and wind power generators to have a combined capacity of 1.2 billion kilowatts by 2030; and boosting forest coverage by around six billion cubic meters by 2030.¹³ Transitioning from coal to renewable energy is critical to China's efforts, and the country has already made some progress.¹⁴ However, it will not be easy to achieve as the government struggles to maintain economic growth; ease public discontent; and overcome tensions with the United States, the second-largest emitter. Nevertheless, as climate change and environmental degradation became a top priority for the Chinese government, it participated more in

13 "China's Achievements, New Goals and New Measures for Nationally Determined Contributions", China's submission to UNFCCC. See <https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/China%20First/China%E2%80%99s%20Achievements,%20New%20Goals%20and%20New%20Measures%20for%20Nationally%20Determined%20Contributions.pdf>. See also Climate Action Tracker, "China Submits Updated NDC, Confirming Targets Announced in September 2020," <https://climateactiontracker.org/climate-target-update-tracker/china/> [accessed 15 April 2022].

14 For more details, please refer to Lindsay Maizland, "China's Fight against Climate Change and Environmental Degradation", Website of Council on Foreign Relation, 19 May 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-climate-change-policies-environmental-degradation> [accessed 15 April 2022].

global climate talks and has been open to working with other countries.

3.2 Women in China under Climate Change

Based on the research results of a project called “Gender Dimension of Vulnerability to Climate Change in China”¹⁵ conducted in 2015, it was found that females are in a quite disadvantaged position in terms of obtaining the natural, social, physical, funding and human capitals that are basic factors in their vulnerability. According to the survey¹⁶, women’s livelihoods are slightly more likely to be affected negatively by climate change and disasters. In addition, because women rely more on agricultural livelihoods and earn less than men, negative impacts would exacerbate their vulnerability. Women take on more household duties, which constrain them from obtaining opportunities such as non-farm employment, training, and involvement in

15 This research project was commissioned by the UN Women–Asia and the Pacific, in which data was collected through a policy review, interviews and a survey of over 3400 people in eight counties of Jiangsu, Qinghai and Shaanxi provinces. It aims to find out how gender equality, climate change and disaster risks intersect in China. See UN Women, *Gender Dimension of Vulnerability to Climate Change in China* (United Nations, 2016), <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEA/Docs/Publications/2017/01/Gender-Dimensions-English-r2.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2022].

16 The analysis is based on 3,402 valid samples which were collected via questionnaire survey across eight counties and 196 villages in Jiangsu Nantong, Qinghai Xining and Shaanxi Baoji. For more information on the survey, the respondents and the pilot sites, see appendix 2 and 3 of the report *Gender Dimension of Vulnerability to Climate Change in China*.

public affairs; this partially prevents them from enhancing their adaptive capacity. Women hold less land, fewer loan qualifications, and less decision-making power and autonomy; consequently, they are less confident and have fewer opportunities to change their lives. The disadvantages women experience are related to traditional gender roles, education levels and the traditional marriage customs. It is suggested that policies should integrate such gender considerations to improve women's adaptation capabilities.¹⁷

Some scholars also suggest that in the process of protecting the environment, the unique connection between women and the natural environment as well as the impact that the environment has on women's development are ignored. Thus, there is a need to place emphasis on women's development at the same time as stressing environmental conservation rather than neglecting women's characteristics and functions, their position in modern societies, and their political structures and knowledge systems.¹⁸

4 Pope Francis's Integral Ecology

In the view of the close relationship between climate change and poverty, a vision capable of taking into account of these aspects is very much needed. Pope Francis sees

17 UN Women, *Gender Dimension of Vulnerability to Climate Change in China*, p. 29.

18 Ren Xiaodong, Huang Xiao and Cai Kui, "Women's Development and Environmental Conservation in Western China", in *Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development in Rural China* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 321.

that poverty and ecological crisis are intertwined. For him, there is an intimate relationship between human beings and other created beings, and we are all connected to our source of life and destiny, God. In his social encyclical *Laudato Si'*,¹⁹ he points out that the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to the causes related to human and social degradation. A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment (*LS* 48, 49). Today, environmental problems cannot be separated from human, family, labor, and urban contexts, which are tangled to how we relate to others and to the environment (*LS* 141). The pope claims that there is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. We are not faced with two separate crises, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. In such an economic ecology, the protection of the environment is then seen as an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it. Since everything is closely interrelated, an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and the same time protecting nature is indispensable (*LS* 139). Pope Francis calls for a “social ecology” that recognizes “the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life.” This includes the primary social group, the

19 Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, On Care for Our Common Home, 2015.

family, as well as wider local, national, and international communities. When these institutions are weakened, the result is injustice, violence, a loss of freedom, and a lack of respect for law – all of which have consequences for the environment (*LS 142*).

Pope Francis also argues that it is important to pay attention to “cultural ecology” in order to protect the cultural treasures of humanity. He points out that “There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture (*LS 144*).” Pope Francis also talks about the ecology of daily life in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and our neighborhoods. We attempt to shape our environment to express our identity, but “when it is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, such overstimulation makes it difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy (*LS 147*).” The pope recognizes that extreme poverty experienced in areas lacking harmony, open spaces or potential for integration, can lead to incidents of brutality and to exploitation by criminal organizations, affecting people’s ability to practice human ecology. But he hopes that people weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which the walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness overcome (*LS 149*). Human ecology, Pope Francis argues, cannot be separated

from the notion of the common good, which he calls a central and unifying principle of social ethics.

Thus, he proposes an integral ecology that basically and clearly respects the human and social dimensions. The intertwined relation of humans to environment was affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, which Francis shares, states that “every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment (*LS* 142).”²⁰ With the vision of integral ecology, we need to put efforts in improving the quality of human life as well as nature. Pope Francis’ vision of integral ecology and the common good also includes justice between generations, not just the present moment.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis highlights some obstacles to integral ecology, such as an economic system that focuses on short-term profit through the production of consumer goods and a form of technology that views nature as a set of resources to be exploited (*LS* 106). He also emphasizes a misguided anthropocentrism that leads to a misguided lifestyle (*LS* 122). Pope Francis, who acknowledged that Christians sometimes misinterpret the Bible, has vehemently rejected the idea that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures (*LS* 67). Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose, for “the entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless

²⁰ See also Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no.51.

affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God (*LS* 84).” Further, he implies that a spirituality that forgets God would lead to replacing God by worshipping the earthly powers or ourselves, to the point of trampling on creation (*LS* 75). A renewal of humanity would result in a renewal of our relationship and increase consciousness of our connectedness with nature. Hence, an adequate anthropology is called for (*LS* 118).

To counter these obstacles, Pope Francis suggests that we need ecological conversion that results in a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, a return to a life of simplicity, sobriety, humility in avoiding limitless mastery and autonomy, inner peace, a balanced lifestyle with a deeper understanding of life, and a capacity for wonder (*LS* 222-225). These virtues are a safeguard against the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness and form the bases for a new ethics of love and mutual care (*LS* 230). He also claims that unless everyone works together to find solutions to the environmental crisis through dialogue and transparency, the world will continue on the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us. This dialogue must occur on the local, national and international level, and should include people from business, politics, science, religion and the environmental movements, as well as ordinary people whose lives will be affected.²¹

An obstacle to integral ecology not treated in *Laudato*

21 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, chapter 5.

Si' is the fact that societal gender patterns play in the consumption of earth's resources, including food, are ignored. If the world is viewed as a whole, it is primarily women in the global south that produce food for most people on earth. However, most of the hungry people in the world are not men, but women and their children.²² As mentioned above, it is women who are disproportionately affected by weather and natural disasters, many of which are directly the result of global warming. More attention should be paid to the impact of climate change on women.

5 Integral Ecology and Ecofeminism²³

Laudato Si' sheds light on our understanding of the root causes of the ecological problems that can be traced to anthropocentric and technocratic paradigm. It matters to have a renewed theological understanding of God's image in connection to nature, the role of human beings in creation, and our interconnectedness to creation. Nonetheless, *Laudato Si'* and other church's social teachings²⁴ neglect

22 For more details, see "Gender Inequalities and Food Insecurity", *Reliefweb*, UN-OCHR, 15 July 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/gender-inequalities-and-food-insecurity-ten-years-after-food-price-crisis-why-are-women> [accessed 20 April 2022]

23 This section is a revised and expanded version of a part in my earlier article. Mary Yuen, "Food Security and Food Waste: Reflection from *Laudato Si'* and Ecofeminist Perspectives", in *Foodscapes: Beyond the Food Environment – A Feminist Theological Take on Food Issues in Asia*, ed. Kristine C. Meneses and Christine E. Burke (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2019), pp. 56-75.

24 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg : A Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See*

the crucial role played by patriarchalism in shaping the cultural categories responsible for humanity's domination over creation. There is a lack of feminist perspective in the notion of integral ecology or the encyclical as a whole which is crucial in challenging the notion of anthropocentrism, as well as human domination or male domination of the nature. Below I will employ ecological theology of liberation and ecofeminist theology in re-visioning integral ecology.

5.1 Ecological Theology of Liberation

Leonardo Boff is a pioneer in the field of ecological theology of liberation, playing a significant role in connecting the abuse of nature or nonhumans to our fellow humans. As early as 1984, Boff proposes that an adequate theology of liberation has to include at least the aspects of class, culture, gender, and ecology in light of the Kingdom of God. It generates a utopia that sustains the visions of a new social order and the desire for the fullness of life. His fundamental conviction is that “God penetrates, permeates, all aspects of reality” and that everything in existence pertains to the kingdom.”²⁵ Such four-fold liberation (class, culture, gender, and ecology) very much resonates with the claims made by Asian feminist theologians who emphasize that multi-axial oppression can be found everywhere. We need to be aware of

for Environment 1972-2002 (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2002).

25 Leonardo Boff, “Integral Liberation and Partial Liberations”, in *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics*, Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, eds. (NY: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 51, 54.

our multiple identities in terms of class, culture, ethnicities, and so on. Unconsciously, we repeat the cycle of violence not only to our fellow humans, but to nature, such that, women or members of lower socioeconomic classes, who are outcasts might in turn exploit nature. Hence, we must be aware of our privileged position and the relationship with other creatures in nature, as suggested by Asian feminist theologians.²⁶

In a 1995 *Concilium* volume, Boff and Virgilio Elizondo co-edited a volume with the theme “Ecology and Poverty.” In the editorial, Boff and Elizondo point out that an integral ecology is increasingly needed as it can articulate various aspects with a view to founding a new alliance between societies and nature, which will result in the conservation of the patrimony of the earth, socio-cosmic well-being, and the maintenance of conditions. They said that how to implement it is the great challenge raised by the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.²⁷

Later, in his book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff associates integral ecology with women and

26 Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), pp. 61-62; Chung Hyun Kyung, “Ecology, feminism and African and Asian spirituality: towards a spirituality of eco-feminism”, in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, D.G.Hallman, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 177; Aruna Gnanadason, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), pp. 92–93.

27 Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo, eds., “Editorial”, in *Ecology and Poverty* (Concilium, 1995/5, London: SCM Press, 1995), p. ix.

ecofeminist thinking. He argues that “to work out a new covenant with nature, one of integration and harmony, we can find sources of inspiration in women and the feminine (in both man and woman).” He claims that “women can help overcome the dualisms introduced by patriarchal and androcentric culture between world and human being, spirit and body, and interiority and efficiency. They have developed a consciousness that is open and receptive, able to see the sacramental character of the world, and hence to hear the message of things, the beckoning of values and meanings that go beyond merely decoding intelligibility structures.”²⁸ He insists that the wholeness of female experience points us toward that stance that we must build and develop together, if we intend to live in an ecological era in harmony and in a loving relationship with the entire universe.

5.2 Ecofeminism: Theories and Theology

Ecofeminism sheds light on our discussion and reflection of the ecological and poverty issues because it insists that human beings are not radically separate from nature as our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within and without us. Nature has rights, and all things have intrinsic worth that we all must respect. Only when we acknowledge and respect the rights of both human and nonhuman, we would temper our tendency to dominate nature.²⁹

28 Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 27.

29 Michael E. Zimmerman, “Feminism, Deep Ecology, and

Moreover, ecofeminists asserts that by replacing categories, such as atomism, hierarchalism, dualism, and androcentrism in enviromental ethics and ecology, humans can learn to dwell in harmony with nonhumans.³⁰ Ecofeminists are for the organic forging of a genuinely anti-dualistic, or dialectical, theory and praxis. The domination of nature originates in society and therefore must be resolved in society. Therefore, the embodied woman as social historical agent, rather than product of natural law is the subject of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists believe that women are the revolutionary bearers of this anti-dualistic potential that can create a different kind of culture and politics to transform nature/culture distinction and create a free ecological society.³¹ Furthermore, ecofeminism sees anthropocentric domination as a causal extension of social domination of humans. In other words, it sees the ideologies of classism, racism, and sexism as deeply rooted in the ideologies of naturism and speciesism. These ideologies are intimately

Environmental Ethics”, in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), p. 142.

30 Zimmerman, “Feminism, Deep Ecology, and Environmental Ethics”, p. 124.

31 For a summary of the main thoughts of the ecofeminist movement, please refer to Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Ecology, Feminism, and Theology”, in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), pp. 201-2. Also see “Feminist Environmental Philosophy: Characterization of Ecofeminist Philosophy”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-environmental/#ChaEco> [accessed 20 July 2018].

connected and mutually reinforcing, creating a weblike character of various forms of oppressions.³² From the ecofeminist perspective, overcoming patriarchy is part of the solution to the problems of the ecological crisis and poverty, especially women in poverty.

For ecofeminist theologians, God is neither male nor anthropomorphic. God in ecofeminist spirituality is the immanent source of life and the renewal of life that sustains the whole planetary and cosmic community. God should be seen as an everlasting divine being from which diversity and coexistence flow. God is the one that enables us to overcome the distortions that threaten healthy relations. God is the great sustainer and life giver who shows us what life in communion is all about: interdependency, coexistence, mutual respect, and love.³³

Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara proposes a holistic ecofeminism in response to the ecological and

32 Murray Bookchin, "Thinking Ecologically: A Dialectical Approach", in *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 189; Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: the Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982), p. 1. Also see Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads*, p. 65.

33 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology", in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Human*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 106; Ann Marie Mealey, "Feminism and Ecology", in *Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology, and Resource Extraction*, eds. Cgrustuaba Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), p. 186.

poverty problem in Latin America. In citing an example of people living along the border of a polluted canal in a poor neighborhood and they never cleaned it, Gebara uses it to illustrate the daily life of the uneducated poor people, locking into a patriarchal political and economic system without pursuing alternatives. She argues that a holistic ecofeminist liberation theology aims at emancipating people from such patterns.³⁴

Gebara argues that ecofeminism proposes a new relationship with the earth and with the entire cosmos. Holistic ecofeminism has two purposes. First, its concern is fundamentally towards the oppressed, the voiceless of history who, upon birth are *de facto* excluded from the chance to live a full life because of their economic situation. Second, the commitment to put an end to patriarchy in all its forms. Gebara states that, “*we look at the air, the water, the earth. We sense deep within ourselves that our planet is not just a place – it is our own body.*” She argues that we must break from our dualistic constructs of God and of the world – constructs that are hierarchical and tend to exclude the “Other” (the most vulnerable and underprivileged) as less valuable, for example, God is separated from the world; man from woman, heaven from Earth; good from bad.³⁵

34 Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water, Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 2.

35 Ivone Gebaras (interviewed by Mary Judith Ress), “Ecofeminism and Panentheism”, in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), p. 210.

The ecofeminist perspective opens itself to the multiplicity of forms reality takes and to reality's amazing interdependence, and in the process it reaffirms the need to avoid reducing the mysterious One to a single image. Gebara proposes the image of a Sophia creation which can make space for an ecological spirituality that can motivate people to protect our world.³⁶ In *LS*, God is presented as a creator who can be found in nature – a leaf, a mountain trail, a dewdrop, a poor person's face – and in all things (*LS* 233). God's presence actively holds all of creation in existence and all creatures are manifestations of God's glory and power. This understanding is not antithetical to Gebara's ecofeminist's idea.³⁷ In fact, both the pope and Gebara call for solidarity with people actively working together to restore damage caused by human abuse of God's creation (*LS* 14, 232).

To take ecofeminism seriously in the Church, we should focus on the task of liberating women and the earth in specific contexts where oppression is experienced. The complexities and diversities of women's experience and ecological concerns urge us to adopt a hermeneutic of difference. Such an approach values difference but not necessarily threaten orthodoxy or objectivity. It encourages people to reflect morally from their own experiences in their

36 Gebara, *Longing for Running Water; Ecofeminism and Liberation*, pp. 126-127.

37 Anne M. Clifford, "Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, On Care for Our Common Home: An Ecofeminist Response", *CTSA Proceedings* 72 / 2017

own contexts.³⁸

6 Integral Ecology and Confucian Ecology

In a Chinese context, in this section, from the perspective of inter-cultural dialogue, I would also like to examine briefly the commonality between integral ecology and Chinese Confucianism.³⁹

As discussed above, integral ecology emphasizes the intertwined relation of human to environment. We need to put efforts in improving the quality of human life as well as nature. In Confucian thought, humanity exists in an inter-relationship between heaven and earth. “Heaven” is seen as the guiding force, giving direction to change and progress, while “earth” provides the natural context and seasonal changes. Humanity is seen as having a moral task to work in balance with these other two forces. The classic Chinese trinity of Heaven, Earth and Humankind, together manifesting the true embodiment of nature itself. The *Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean)* succinctly captures the essence of this cosmological thinking:

38 Mealey, “Feminism and Ecology”, pp.188-189.

39 This section is taken from the “Confucian Statement on the Environment”, This statement was prepared by Professor Tu Weiming of the International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA) and announced at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) meeting in Trondheim, Norway in July 2013, <https://interfaithsustain.com/confucian-statement-on-the-environment/> [accessed 30 April 2022]. Also see Alliance of Religions and Conservation, “Confucian Ecology”, *Interfaith Centre for Sustainable Development*, <https://interfaithsustain.com/confucian-ecology/> [accessed 30 April 2022].

Only those who are the most sincere [authentic, true and real] can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature; they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things. If they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.⁴⁰

Underlying and unifying this triad of heaven, earth and humanity is the notion of *qi*. This is understood as the material life force of the universe that runs through all things, integrating human beings with nature and driving the continuous process of change and creativity.

Moreover, the Confucian humanism and understanding of the universe as a holistic unity is aptly characterized as an ethic or ethos of responsibility and care, towards the well-being of creation, including human persons and the nature. Neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yangming (1472-1529) wrote in his *Chuan Xi Lu (Inquiry on the Great Learning)*: “The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person.”

In fact, a core Confucian value, as Mencius (372-289 B.C.) stated, is that this world is a precious heritage passed

⁴⁰ *Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean)*, no. 22.

on to us from our ancestors and it is a resource entrusted to us by numerous generations yet to come. “The sage, namely, a human who has attained the highest stage, is similar to Heaven and Earth and therefore his conduct would not violate Heaven and Earth. His knowledge is comprehensive of all ten thousand things and his way will save all under Heaven. Even in acting in terms of special considerations, he does not deviate from rectitude.”

Like integral ecology and Christian values, Confucianism values a sustainable harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The idea of the unity of Heaven and Humanity implies four inseparable dimensions of the human condition: self, community, nature and Heaven. The full distinctiveness of each enhances rather than impedes, a harmonious integration of the others. The self, as a centre of relationships, establishes its identity by interacting with community variously understood, from the family to the global village and beyond. A sustainable harmonious relationship between the human species and nature is not an abstract ideal, but a concrete guide for practical living.

The primary role of Confucianism is to promote education through the cultivation of a virtuous, responsible and caring person, in order to enable people to become truly human. It is also a dynamic and transformative process of self-realization, social engagement and cultural creativity. It is well expressed in *Daxue (The Great Learning)*: “Only when personal lives are cultivated are families regulated;

only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are governed is there peace all under Heaven. Therefore from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must take self-cultivation as the root.”⁴¹ When one sets his or her goal as a virtuous and caring person, he or she will take care of others and nature in a responsible way.

7 Pastoral Action and Policies Response

To put the concept of integral ecology into practice, the Vatican’s Dicastery of Integral Human Development (DIHD) put forward a “*Laudato Si’* Action Platform,” with the goal of journeying towards total sustainability in the spirit of integral ecology.”⁴² This is collaboration among the Vatican, an international coalition of Catholic organizations, and all men and women of good will. This action platform was opened for usage on 14 November 2021, on the World Day of Prayer for the Poor. This day was chosen as a meaningful symbol of the Platform’s commitment to serving those most vulnerable under the present socio-ecological crisis.

It is emphasized that this platform employs a truly ground-up approach, rooted in the strengths and realities of communities around the world, empowering all to take “decisive action, here and now” as all people journey

41 *Daxue (The Great Learning)*, no. 4.

42 For more details, please see “*Laudato Si’* Action Platform”, Dicastery of Integral Human Development, <https://laudatosiiactionplatform.org/> [accessed 5 May 2022].

towards a better future together, which is stated in *Laudato Si'* (LS 161). With this platform, all people are invited to explore their connection with all creation and navigate through the resources to evaluate where one stands on the road to sustainability, reflect on the principles of integral ecology, and make a plan to take action to address this crisis. This platform is designed for seven sectors: families, parishes and dioceses, educational institutions, healthcare and healing, organizations and groups, economic, and religious, offering resources, planning guides, guidance for action, and inspiring stories of action. We can see that based on the notion of integral ecology, the Church tries to put it into concrete action, not only at an individual level, but also at a policy level on a wider scale, in order to respond to the call for healing in our relationships with God, our neighbors, and the Earth itself, and walking the “path to renewal” together (LS 202).

As mentioned above, *Laudato Si'* is not only for the faithful but also for all men and women of good will (LS 3). Thus, how to put the spirit and principles of the notion of integral ecology into practice in the secular world through policies at various levels is a big concern. Pope Francis and his representatives participated in different international events and spoke publicly on integral ecology, hoping to give an effective voice in affecting the relevant policies on eradicating poverty and supporting sustainability of the environment. The suggestions and works of the United Nations' organizations on development and environment

should be taken into consideration seriously, especially those relating to poverty-environment mainstreaming. Proposed by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and UN Environment Program (UNEP), it is a powerful practice to help eradicating poverty, reducing inequality and combatting environmental degradation. Economic development and poverty reduction strongly depend on improving management of the environment and natural resources, the “natural capital” of the poor. New tools of economic analysis and transparency that reveal the true value of natural capital and sustainable environment and natural resources (ENR) management mobilize support for poverty-environment mainstreaming within government. To ensure that poverty eradication goes hand in hand with sustainable management of natural resources, international, regional and national institutions can apply poverty-environment mainstreaming within their own organizations and practice.⁴³ In response to this socio- ecological issue, the advanced countries should provide more assistance to the developing countries and the vulnerable communities who are deeply impacted by climate change. This is also suggested in the international agreement on climate change.

In improving women’s adaptation to climate change and their living standard, including those in China, researchers recommends that it is important to emphasize that women

43 For more details, please refer to Isabell Kempf, “Poverty and the Environment/Climate Change”, UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/05/9.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2022].

are not merely helpless victims of climate change and poverty. Their participation and leadership can have transformative effects in their countries and communities. They can also be seen as active and effective agents and promoters of adaptation and mitigation. Women have historically developed knowledge and skills related to water harvesting and storage, food preservation and rationing, and natural resource management. More attention should be given to develop and adopt a gender-sensitive and gender-responsive approach to address impacts of climate change and poverty, particularly in areas related to water, food security, agriculture, energy, health, disaster management, and conflict. They should be part of the decision making at national and local levels regarding allocation of resources for climate change initiatives. Funding organizations and donors should also take into account women-specific circumstances when developing and introducing technologies related to climate change adaptation and to try their best to remove the economic, social and cultural barriers that could constrain women from benefiting and making use of them.⁴⁴

In the case of China, in addition to the above suggestions, municipal- and county-level governments should provide more regular training opportunities on knowledge and techniques for coping with climate change, as well as training on gendered perspectives for relevant department staff and officials, to improve the capabilities and results of climate change policy implementation. Moreover,

44 Osman-Elasha, “Women in the Shadow of Climate Change”.

during the implementation of policies guaranteeing women's land rights and interests, full attention should be given to the influences of traditional marriage customs on women's land rights to reduce the number of cases in which women lose land rights. Furthermore, domestic environmental NGOs should be allowed to engage in more activities related to climate change and they should enhance their awareness of gender. UN Women project, at the community level, should strengthen instructional training and professional skills among women and vulnerable groups about making a living and participating in decision-making, rather than conducting simple consciousness training. The goal of these training sessions is to improve vulnerable groups' capacity to combat climate change and disasters.⁴⁵

8 Conclusions

This article examines the notion of integral ecology proposed by Pope Francis in the context of the global poverty problem and ecological crisis. The pope suggests that nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. Our treatment of the natural world is deeply tied to economic, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues. He also acknowledges the obstacles in implementing integral ecology, such as an economic system that focuses on short-term profit, a misguided anthropocentrism and the resulted misguided

⁴⁵ UN Women, *Gender Dimension of Vulnerability to Climate Change in China*, pp. 30-31.

lifestyle, and a misinterpretation of the Scriptural notion that human beings are created in God's image and giving human absolute dominion over other creatures. All these need to be overcome by ecological conversion.

This article also points out that *Laudato Si'* and other Church's social teachings neglect the crucial role played by patriarchalism in shaping the values and social structures that lead to human domination over creation, including women and nature. There is also a lack of gender sensitivity in Pope Francis' notion of integral ecology. Thus, ecological theology of liberation, particularly ecofeminist theology can complement this inadequacy and re-visioning integral ecology. For the sake of inter-cultural dialogue, this article also discusses the commonality between integral ecology and Chinese Confucian ecology. Both affirm the intertwined relation of human to environment or human to heaven and earth. They value a sustainable harmonious relationship between human and nature. At the end, based on integral ecology and ecofeminist theology, pastoral actions and policy responses are briefly discussed.