

The gap between moral norms and public policy

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In less than two years, the American Catholic right's sentiment toward Pope Francis seems to have drifted from wariness to criticism to anticipatory anger. This Pynchonesque turn from reactions to pre-reactions is marked by the still-unreleased papal encyclical on the environment, with its expected call to action on climate change.

Maureen Mullarkey, in [a bravura performance](#) at *First Things*, calls the pope "an ideologue and a meddlesome egoist," as revealed by his "clumsy intrusion into the Middle East and covert collusion with Obama over Cuba." According to Mullarkey, it is "megalomania" that "sends him galloping into geopolitical—and now meteorological—thickets," rather than a valid exercise of his office or even a good-faith attempt to urge the world in healthy direction. This megalomania finds Francis "sacralizing politics and bending theology to premature, intemperate policy endorsements."

In fairness to Francis's other critics, not many of them sound like a McCarthyite version of Foghorn Leghorn. (In case you miss Mullarkey's implication that the pope is a Marxist, her post underscores the point by including a painting of the 1920 assembly of the Communist International.) But this refrain is echoed in less fulsome tones by Catholic and non-Catholic commenters alike: the pope is beyond his competence in matters of science and public policy, at least where the environment is concerned. Robert George, while affirming the pope's power to bind the consciences of the faithful on moral "norms," [insists](#) that the pope has no special insight on "matters of empirical fact" such as the debate—which George presents as an even one—between scientists who affirm anthropogenic climate change and those who deny it. So if you doubt the empirical basis, you can ignore the prescription without denying the norm.

The specifics of teaching authority in Catholicism make this a thorny issue for Catholics who deny the reality of climate change (or the policy implications thereof), perhaps more so because of the high status many of them have claimed for papal

teaching when it touches public policy on civil marriage or abortion. Sinner that I am, I feel some schadenfreude when I read these contortions—George in particular writes with a steely, majestic dissonance that I find fascinating.

Of course, perfectly analogous negotiations over the relationship of religious truth to public affairs are happening everywhere and all the time, however that religious truth is known and promulgated. For any given publicly applicable moral norm we can identify in Christianity—be it kindness toward the foreigner, the protection of human life, a preference for peace over war, or indeed the care of creation—there is a gap between the norm and its policy implications. It's a gap as large as the underlying politics of the Christian community that is being called to embrace it.

Parish preachers learn this, sometimes at considerable personal cost. Few of us are experts in human biology, development economics, political science, or climatology. Even if we are, when our words are unwelcome such expertise tends to be received as simply one voice in a cacophonous debate. More often we are, at best, experts only in a literature and a communal history that touch on all of these things but lack the capacity to define any of them. Leaping from the tradition to the world always entails a risk of misunderstanding the world or misleading the faithful.

There is no safe mean, doctrinally or politically, between empty generalities and erring particulars. “All moral norms require prudential judgment in their application,” [writes](#) Michael Sean Winters, with the seasoned weariness of a Catholic liberal, but “prudential judgment is not a get-out-of-jail-free card to hold any position one wants.”

That is true—and yet the jail door stands wide open. “The world is what it has been and will remain,” says Mullarkey, with dramatic and unintended irony. “Satan is still the prince of it. And Francis is imprudent.”