This week, an extraordinary private conversation took place online among a group of sustainability thought leaders. It began with an essay distributed by email, written by Terry Yosie, President and CEO of the World Environment Center (and an occasional GreenBiz contributor). He provided a critical assessment of the Pope’s Encyclical on climate change — including whether and how it might impact the global climate treaty negotiations taking place this year, culminating at COP21 in Paris.

The essay, distributed to about 80 of Yosie’s associates (including me), ignited a response — initially from Bob Langert, former McDonald’s sustainability head (and a GreenBiz columnist), with responses from, among others, a former EPA head, a former White House climate official, two distinguished sustainability professors, a corporate sustainability executive, and one of the foremost thought leaders on sustainability.

It was a private exchange, but I asked permission from Yosie and the respondents to reprint it here; nearly everyone agreed.

It begins with Yosie’s essay, followed by the various exchanges, edited ever-so-lightly. I hope you find it as thoughtful as I do. Feel free to add your own comments below.

— Joel Makower

Encyclical Exuberance

By Terry F. Yosie, President & CEO, World Environment Center

Pope Francis’ recent Encyclical letter, Laudato Si, on climate change, poverty and inequality, and capitalism, has generated a blitz of media commentaries that are both supportive and critical. Given the highly charged nature of the climate change debate, the growing concerns about the social impacts of capitalism and the popularity of the Pope, such widespread reactions are to be expected.

Virtually all commentators have assumed, or fear, that the Encyclical will have a significant impact upon national delegations that will assemble in Paris in December to try and finalize a climate change agreement, in addition to motivating a broader
debate about the social impacts of capitalism as currently practiced. Their reasoning reveals more of their own objectives and desired outcomes rather than a realistic assessment of the Encyclical’s likely impact.

Contrary to this conventional opinion, the Encyclical’s influence is limited by several important factors. First, it was published too late to affect policy decisions of the most influential national climate negotiators. Many areas of agreement have already been achieved, and delegates will be guided by more tangible and secular national and economic interests as they attempt to resolve the remaining issues.

Many national delegations already feel the wind at their backs to successfully broker an agreement. This wind could become even stronger following the upcoming summit meeting in Washington between US President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Compared to these heavyweights, the Pope’s influence will be largely exhortatory as the Vatican is not constituted to deliver financial aid, technical support or other forms of assistance to nations impacted by climate change nor does it possess the means to do heavy lifting during the actual negotiations. Pope Francis can urge the nations to do more to reduce climate change impacts, but the science, the process and the potential outcomes have been well defined well before his entry into the conversation.

Second, *Laudato Si* offers a significant critique of the current system of investor and state-driven market capitalism and points to a number of flaws in the current system, including poverty, inequality, and the disproportionately adverse consequences of climate change to those lacking economic opportunity.

Ironically, the Encyclical is silent on the issue of women’s empowerment, a major avenue for building economic capacity and addressing a number of social ills including under-employment.

More fundamentally, not just Western European or American societies practice the type of capitalism that the Pope critiques, but the most influential emerging markets in the world have seen their own poverty rates dramatically decline and their middle classes significantly expand. These nations—including Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and Poland—are unlikely to dramatically change an economic system where they have emerged as principal beneficiaries.

Third, while religion continues to represent an important element in the lives of many citizens, its voice is not unified across the world’s major faith groups. Even within the Catholic church’s one billion parishioners, climate change and capitalism do not presently register as top tier matters of concern. The increased secularization of society in many parts of the word has also led people to become less deferential to any voice of authority, spiritual, governmental or otherwise.

Joseph Stalin once inquired about how many military divisions the Pope had in order to challenge the doctrine of Communism. In the case of Pope John Paul II, it turned
out that he had many more spiritual divisions than the Soviet Union could muster in Poland and other Eastern European nations. While climate change and capitalism certainly possess moral dimensions, they are not perceived in those terms by most citizens, business executives or policymakers—at least not presently.

There is also the question of how much energy, time and ability Pope Francis will be able to mobilize to pursue the *Laudato Si* agenda given the many other challenges he faces even as he acknowledges that his own tenure may be limited.

Pope Francis has delivered a unique and challenging critique in his Encyclical, one that may gain greater resonance in the future. In the meantime, both climate deniers and sustainability proponents should calm themselves and refrain from thinking that lightning will strike and move the masses.

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*[Bob Langert, former VP, Corporate Social Responsibility & Sustainability, McDonald's, currently GreenBiz Editor at Large]*

Terry, I'm so shocked at your letter. Okay, I don't debate the limits of the Pope, but why go out of your way to discount him? My presumption is that you oppose much of what he advocates.

Despite the limits, the Pope is providing phenomenal leadership.

Respectfully disagree.

Bob

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*[Yosie to Langert]*

Actually Bob, I agree with much of the Pope's message. My point is that there are structural limits to the Vatican's influence. Acknowledging these limits should in no way diminish the power of the Pope's leadership and perspective. It's just that, and I'm very clear about this, the short-term impact will be limited. I also agree with Andy Hoffman that climate change is a cultural issue — but culture change can also evolve slowly. The Vatican is providing a unique leadership role in this debate, but the debate will largely be decided on secular terms.

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*[Andrew J. Hoffman, Director, Erb Institute, Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise, Ross School of Business/SNRE, University of Michigan responds with “an alternative viewpoint...respectfully submitted” and a link to an article he co-authored on the Pope's Encyclical, excerpted here]*

Making a case on theological grounds builds on long-standing arguments in the Catholic catechism that environmental degradation is a violation of the seventh
commandment (Thou shalt not steal) as it involves theft from future generations and the poor. Against such a moral backdrop, the very call to “make the business case to protect the global climate” – a common tactic to argue for action on climate change - seems rather absurd. The pope’s statement will shift the tenor of the public and political conversation in needed ways.

...

If the message of climate change is delivered more from the church, synagogue, mosque or temple, people will internalize it as a moral issue that compels them to act regardless of the “business case.” A change in the tenor of the public debate in America will set the stage for leaders of all faiths to step forward.

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[Yosie to Hoffman]

Andy:

I read your interview last week and thought it was very insightful, One take-away I had was that the Pope was putting in play a moral and values driven argument that could re-order human thinking about our relationship w/nature—a major reversal of thinking on a fundamental level. In my view such a values revolution could require an extended period of time. Of course, current trends could alter the time frame of human responsiveness.

A question for you: The last prominent person to make a focused moral argument for addressing climate change was Al Gore. How would you compare Gore’s approach and likely effectiveness with the Pope’s?

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[Daniel Vermeer, Associate Professor of the Practice of Energy and Environment and Executive Director of the Center for Energy, Development, and the Global Environment at Duke University]

This is a great conversation, friends. Terry and Andy, thanks for stirring us to conversation.

Just a few points to add:

1. Culture change does not need to happen slowly — it often has the character of punctuated equilibrium, where little movement is observable for long periods, but disruption builds, and then the dynamic is suddenly reframed. I think the gay marriage issue is a good demonstration of this phenomenon. As Robert Pirsig says (any “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” fans?), “Stuckness shouldn't be avoided. It's the psychic predecessor of all real understanding.” So I take heart that these kinds of deep changes can (and often do) happen fast, and that our work is
stirring up currents that ultimately disrupt the status quo (even if the “action-reaction” cycle is complicated).

2. I am also hopeful about the potential impact of the Pope’s message, in that it will challenge people of all faiths to connect their beliefs and convictions to broader questions of “creation care.” Maybe even more powerfully, reframing climate in terms of personal morality and social justice (rather than only politics and economics) unites many groups of people around their core beliefs. This doesn’t suddenly “solve” the climate crisis, but it opens up lots of space for new ideas, shared convictions, and unusual coalitions.

Further, we need a dual consciousness that is calibrated both to the urgency and scale of the climate/environment crisis AND to the “tectonic” dynamics of historical change. I think environmentalists have often overplayed the urgency message without framing the message in its proper historical and sociological context. Religious leaders have a unique ability to communicate existential truths, since this is a fundamental role of religion in society. I love to see the Pope recognize and embrace this role now.

3. I know Gore was/is polarizing on this issue, and it is hard to argue that he was successful in aligning people around the climate cause. On the other hand, he did a lot of good in putting climate squarely on the national and global agenda. This period of gridlock and polarization is inevitable (given the stakes and the vested interests at play), and we need to creatively engage the grand debate that Gore helped to articulate. I appreciate his contribution, and now it is time for those with other assets and power to take the debate in a new direction.

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[William K. Reilly, Senior Advisor to TPG Capital, LP and U.S. EPA Administrator during the George H.W. Bush administration]

I met with John Paul II in 1990 and urged him to issue an encyclical on the environment. I had previously met with US bishops led by Cardinal Bernardin, was invited to make a formal presentation, the bishops issued a splendid pastoral and the Pope issued a statement, not an encyclical. And nothing happened that I could discern, not a mention from any pulpit in my experience of Sunday mass in the US. So I am wary about immediate impact, and at a meeting with Pope Francis last month raised the need for follow-up, for attention to execution.

The encyclical is being sent to every bishop in the world so this time it may have more impact. But the Sunday after the encyclical appeared it was not mentioned in my Hispanic mass in Healdsburg, Calif., nor later in Alexandria, Va. I suspect there’s uncertainty about exactly what behavior is required, practical, immediately called for.
The message against excessive consumption is so contrary to American values. We are a materialistic culture, though also a religious one. Francis writes as St Francis might have, and it's radical in its implications. A very useful exercise would be to begin to identify near term specific measures that conform to the overall theme of the encyclical, and particularly to highlight to evangelicals and others who take Scripture seriously his superb interpretation of "dominion" in Genesis.

Ultimately people march not for science but for what is right and just, for moral and spiritual reasons. And the Pope has provided the charter for the moral dimension of climate policy. People like us are going to have to take it from here.

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[Roger Ballentine, President of Green Strategies; formerly Chairman of the White House Climate Change Task Force and Deputy Assistant to the President for Environmental Initiatives under Bill Clinton]

Bill’s last point is important. The impact of the Pope's Encyclical is still being measured, even as it moves off the headlines. Fundamentally, I believe that the Pope may have upended the political dynamic of the climate debate in the U.S.

To date, the climate issue has been largely debated in a two-dimensional echo chamber reinforced by calcified ideological presuppositions: it's the economy versus the environment. Despite the fact that many of us like to think that this perceived trade-off has long-since been vanquished, political debates can sometimes be immune from evidentiary influence. What the Pope has done is add a third dimension -- morality -- to the binary debate. Intergenerational equity and the regressive impacts of a changing climate have long been preached, but not by a preacher with such a megaphone.

This third dimension can be particularly impactful on the U.S. climate debate precisely because neither side in the binary struggle can exclusively claim or wholly dismiss the moral message. The Pope's visit to Washington in September will put this dimension back on the radar screen of policymakers at a time when opponents of action continue to hang their opposition on perceived short term economic considerations alone.

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[Yosie to Ballentine]

Well stated, Roger. Will be interesting to see how much emphasis the Pope will devote to the Encyclical when in the US. The expectation of many, myself included, is that he will and he should.

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[Jennifer Layke, Director, Building Efficiency Initiative of the WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities]
I agree, and believe there is an open door for discussion now that did not exist given the inflexible political positioning of this in past decades. Just as marriage equality underwent a dramatic social shift in the past several years, my hope is that the real impact of the Pope’s message is to reshape the climate discussion as an issue of humanity. I believe can help with a cultural shift, and perhaps that may support a political softening.

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[Stephen Harper, Global Director, Environment and Energy Policy at Intel Corp.]

What has been missed here is the critical question of how much residual moral authority the Church and Pope have after 2 decades of sex scandal. One data point is recent overwhelming pro-gay marriage vote among the Irish, heretofore perhaps the most devoutly Catholic population in the developed world. The Irish, whom Joyce called a 'priest-ridden race', ignored aggressive lobbying by clergy to vote 'yes' by a large margin.

My guess is that at end of day the Pope's message will resonate with devout Catholics and climate change believers who probably don't take moral guidance from the Pope on abortion and other issues. Many conservative, climate-skeptic Catholic commentators and politicos already seem to have discounted the document.

There is one way in which I don't think the Encyclical is helpful: it is overly dismissive of the positive potential of markets and technology. These forces helped create our climate problem, to be sure, but they have lifted hundreds of millions in China and Africa into the middle class. And, IMHO, technology and markets are our only hope of turning the climate momentum around.

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[John Elkington, Co-Founder & Executive Chairman, Volans, and GreenBiz columnist]

I have to say that my heart initially sank when I thought I saw you going head to head with Pope Francis, Terry, and not just because I imagined you being tied to a stake...

There are times when simply getting a world-straddling institution into a neutral position would represent major progress. As it happens, I was in Bonn with Jeff Sachs recently as he shuttled back and forth to the Vatican, and was really surprised by just how muscular the Pope has chosen to be in Laudato Si.

My skepticism about religion has deep roots. Having spent three years in a Catholic convent school in Northern Ireland in the 1950s, as one of three Protestants in the school, the entire thing embedded in a pretty muscular Protestant community, I know only too well what it is to act as a human lightning rod. And having proceeded
thence to Cyprus and Israel, I grew up with powerful antibodies to pretty much all religions.

But perhaps the definitive experience of my life happened the day after the experience with eels described here in that small Irish town, when Mother Superior accused me of being either a "Pagan or a Pantheist," and she "didn't know which was worse!"

Aged 6 or 7, most of that went over my head at the time, but she unwittingly helped pitchfork me into the evolving environmental movement.

As I began to read up on the history of religious wars some years later, it was clear that the Vatican's relationship with science had been pretty spotty. So, antibodies or not, I see a Pope surfing the leading edge of an emerging scientific paradigm, rather than training his canon (do I mean cannon) on a new generation of disruptors, as a very significant, supremely symbolic lagging indicator of change.

And I'm grateful to this Pope for doing credit to the only Catholic saint I could get my head around as a child.

Things for sprinkling such incendiary sparks on the tinder ...

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[Yosie to Elkington]

I think we all realize that there are significant institutional barriers within the Curia that have to be overcome, not to mention the structural obstacles in our economies and societies at large. My analysis of the Encyclical’s limited short-term influence should not obscure the potentially more impactful long-term changes that Pope Francis hopes to inspire. I agree with former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s analysis in the June 29 Wall Street Journal that Paris will become an important milestone on climate policy but not the “finish line that is not yet within reach.”

To me, this is where the Vatican has a more significant long-term opportunity to build the necessary ecclesiastical and secular coalitions that embed his aspirational values into the fabric of everyday life. Does the Vatican have such a long-term plan? At this juncture, we don’t know.

If I may borrow a phrase from Cass Sunstein, perhaps a “nudging” strategy on the part of the sustainability community to engage the Vatican in building a longer-term agenda that addresses societal inequities and redefines our role with nature would be in order. As we saw with Pope Francis’ role in facilitating the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba, the Papacy has the skill sets to catalyze impactful collaboration.

I don’t think it’s out of order to point out the limitations of any Papal strategy; to succumb to that belief would be to betray a lack of confidence in our own convictions about a good and just world. Meanwhile, the more important task is to
integrate this Pope’s compelling moral message with the secular skills necessary to improve the lives of billions of people while preserving the planet.

That common agenda has yet to be developed, and that grim reality will intrude long past the media glare and the current headlines surrounding the Encyclical or COP21. So our real work is just beginning.

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[Steven B. Hellem, President and CEO, Navista, Inc.]

In light of the serious nature of this conversation and dialogue, that I believe to be really great, I offer my own approach that can be immediately thrown in the corner with other ideas that are too far out there to even consider … but NASA is passing Pluto soon and no one thought we’d ever know what was beyond Pluto.

I have always counted myself as someone who wanted action not talk. I am getting really exhausted with all the talk about climate change, not because it isn’t important, but because it’s so much talk. Andy Hoffman your book is brilliant and on the mark in terms of folks who have their reaction and responses to climate change built into their DNA.

One of the responders I believe made reference to what I read as a question, what can the Pope do beyond challenging the global Catholic flock, which by the way, I am one of? And yes John Elkington, our little church, Our Lady Queen of Peace in Arlington, Va., listened to our priest, Father Tim talk in earnestness, seriousness and commitment to the Holy Father’s writing. By the way OLQP is the little, you-all-come, all-are-welcome church that every Catholic Diocese has one of.

Let me throw this one out there recognizing that I am already beginning to put on my armor for the barrage of “You didn’t really say that.”

Why doesn’t the Pope announce, when in Washington, that the Church is going to work with other denominations and build a private sector trillion dollar plus low or no interest revolving loan fund to change out every HVAC system in every commercial building and manufacturing facility in the United States with energy-efficient technologies, and at least reduce the emissions from those facilities in the U.S. that appear to account for about 40+ percent of our nation’s GHG emissions. And, let’s do as a 10-year goal, just like going to the Moon, but for this time do it to show the world how they too can help save the planet.

Goal: substantially reduce GHG emissions, drive technology and innovation, create jobs and set a goal that millions of Americans will engage to make happen and lead the world with action. And by the way, every one of those entities will save money and make their CFO’s and CEO’s happy.
Use the power of the Church and words of this amazing Holy Father and other private- and public-sector organizations to put resources where only words are now. Let’s stop wringing our hands about climate change and do something.

And Terry, sincere thanks for your leadership in creating a document that has truly gotten a lot of good people thinking. So the Encyclical did indeed meet its intended purpose, at least with people that know and mostly respect Terry

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[F. Henry Habicht, Managing Partner, Sail Capital Partners]

Many thanks for a great interchange. Despite the tough acts I am following, let me briefly join. My own view is not that theology is catching up with culture, but rather that church leaders have not adequately acknowledged that stewardship and care for creation have always been compelling theological themes of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, as of course is the principle of the worth of every human being. I would often point this out to a few evangelical Republican friends who used to say that the world will pass away anyway, so we should accord low priority to protecting nature. The Bible does not support such a view.

Even a Pope can exceed his brief by trying to be too politically and socially correct. But Pope Francis is right to remind us what the Bible has always said. This discussion is especially timely on the heels of our Independence Day, reminding us that the Founders of our Republic and intellectuals like Adam Smith and de Tocqueville recognized that a free democracy (capitalist system) only survives when tempered by moral virtue or "moral sentiment".

I will not belabor these theological musings, but I strongly believe that it is more important than ever that we not view climate change as a clash between secular and Judeo-Christian notions of morality. They should be coextensive. As Bill said, "people like us are going to have to take it from here."