



James Walters

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## Our debt to Pope Francis

*Director of the LSE Faith Centre James Walters reflects on the life and legacy of Pope Francis.*



At the LSE Faith Centre, we offer our sympathies to the Roman Catholic community at the London School of Economics and beyond on the death of His Holiness Pope Francis. But as a team from diverse faiths and denominations, we do so acknowledging our own profound debt to this remarkable religious leader.

The Faith Centre has spanned his pontificate, the work finishing on our building just as he was elected in 2013. Our opening event was a **dialogue on the theme of religion and climate change**, a relatively obscure topic at the time, which Pope Francis was to make a **central plank of his papacy**. Drawing on the love of God's creation expressed by his namesake St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis issued his groundbreaking encyclical ***Laudato Si*** in 2015, setting out a comprehensive theological

critique of extractive capitalism and a new approach to the natural world that he called “integral ecology”. Drawing again on the Franciscan theme of solidarity with the poor, he perhaps did more than anyone to connect “the cry of the earth” with “the cry of the poor”.

Uniquely for a papal encyclical, *Laudato Si* sparked an entire movement, influencing not just the Catholic Church but people of all faiths and none. “We need a conversation which includes everyone,” he wrote, “since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” The encyclical raised awareness and emboldened religious communities to recognise that climate change was their concern and that they had something important to contribute. One of the most recent fruits has been *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*, written by a range of Muslim scholars and offering what has been described as an Islamic *Laudato Si*.

The work currently undertaken by our research unit *Religion and Global Society* into Christian and Muslim ecological discourses in Egypt, along with the climate change module of *Beecken Faith and Leadership*, all follows the trajectory set out by Pope Francis. In March 2024 our team travelled to the Vatican to co-host with the *International Union of Superiors General* a workshop for Vatican based diplomats on engaging faith communities in the climate emergency. This year we have been delighted to welcome Carmody Grey, the first *Professor of Integral Ecology* that *Laudato Si* has inspired to join our team as a visiting professor.



*The LSE RGS team speaking at the Vatican in March 2024*

But while Francis of Assisi is famous for his ecological themes, Pope Francis also drew attention to a less well known episode in his life. In 1219, at the height of the Fifth Crusade, the humble friar met with Sultan Malik-el-Kamil to initiate dialogue and exchange peaceful sentiments. This encounter is part of the inspiration behind the Pope’s third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Speaking into the context of

polarising culture wars and the rise of populism, this encyclical calls for a “culture of encounter” that fosters dialogue and friendship. Pope Francis illustrates this by citing his own meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi in 2019 to sign the [Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#).

So integral are the themes of *Fratelli Tutti* to the work of LSE Faith Centre, our team read it together and were privileged to discuss the document with leading Catholic theologian Professor Anna Rowlands. It is one of the most coherent articulations of the need for dialogue across difference from a Christian perspective and, like *Laudato Si*, it has much to offer to those of other religious and non-religious worldviews.

A decade ago, the role of religion in fostering both a peaceful world and a sustainable world was underdeveloped. Perhaps religion was more likely to be viewed as an obstacle to both. Over those ten years, we have attempted to play our role in making the connections between faith, ecology and peace, inspiring a new generation in these principles. But to a large extent, we have sailed on the tide of Pope Francis’s prophetic interventions. The threats posed by populism, inequality and environmental degradation remain existential. Nonetheless, Pope Francis has shown the world a different path and the LSE Faith Centre remains committed to his legacy.

*Photo by [Aleteia Image Department](#)*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the position of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

## About the author

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James Walters is director of the LSE Faith Centre and the Religion and Global Society Research Unit. He is the author of *Loving Your Neighbour in an Age of Religious Conflict* and *Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith are Shaping Today’s World*.

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