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## The Impact and Influence of Four Agents of Atheistic Anthropocentrism on Society and the Environment, in the Light of *Laudato Si'*

Utjecaj i djelovanje četiriju agenata ateističkoga antropocentrizma na društvo i okoliš na tragu *Laudato si'*

**Summary:** The paper deals with the impact and influence of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and the environment. This impact is conducted through agents of atheistic anthropocentrism or social deviations: relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism. The authors have researched conceptual analysis of anthropocentrism and social deviations, which they called four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism. That research opened several new questions that should be further analyzed. One of those questions was about the impact and influence of four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and the environment. The main goal of the paper is to present dangers and deviations that emerge from atheistic anthropocentrism while also taking into account the contribution of Pope Francis and the guidelines and warnings he gives in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

**Keywords:** atheistic anthropocentrism; *Laudato Si'*; relativism; hedonism; consumerism; materialism; impact.

**Sažetak:** Rad se bavi utjecajem ateističkog antropocentrizma na društvo i okoliš. Taj se utjecaj provodi putem agenata ateističkog antropocentrizma ili društvenih devijacija: relativizma, hedonizma, konzumerizma i materijalizma. Autori su proveli istraživanje o konceptualnoj analizi antropocentrizma i društvenih devijacija, koje su nazvali četiri agenta ateističkog antropocentrizma. Navedeno istraživanje je otvorilo nova pitanja za analizu. Jedno od tih pitanja odnosilo se na utjecaj četiri agenta ateističkog antropocentrizma na društvo i okoliš. Glavni cilj rada je prikazati opasnosti i devijacije koje proizlaze iz ateističkog antropocentrizma pritom uzevši u obzir i doprinos pape Franje, te smjernice i upozorenja koje daje u enciklici *Laudato Si'*.

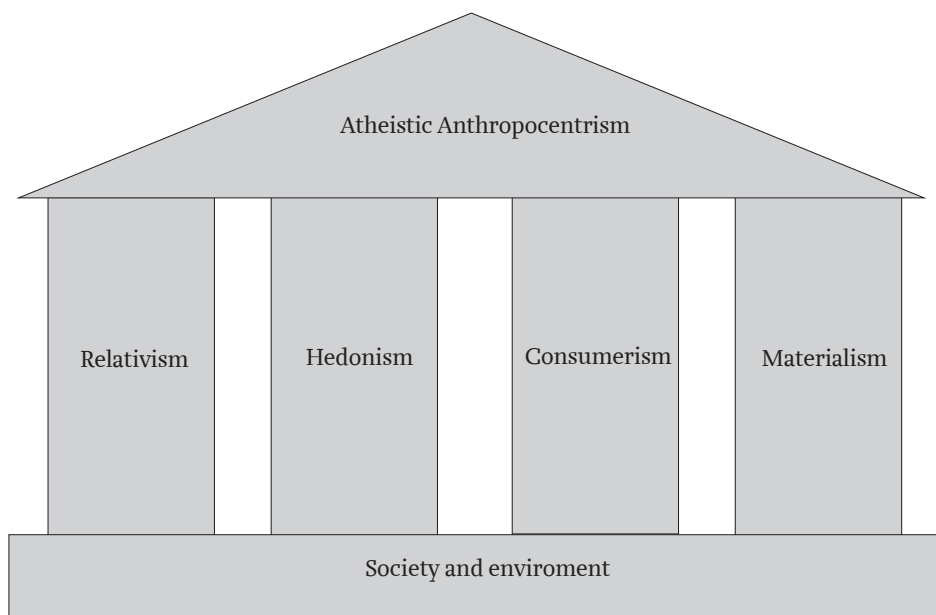
**Ključne riječi:** ateistički antropocentrizam; *Laudato Si'*; relativizam; hedonizam; konzumerizam; materijalizam; utjecaj.

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## Introduction

The paper is a continuation of the authors' research work, which started with analyzing anthropology and anthropocentrism. In the first paper, differentiation was made between biblical, moral or religious anthropocentrism and atheistic anthropocentrism. The biblical, creative image of God the Creator and His creation – human, which is the basis of religious anthropocentrism (Pavlić and Rukavina 74). This was also supported by an argument found in the Old Testament through four Hebrew terms: *basar* (flesh), *nefesh* (soul), *ruah* (spirit) and *leb* (heart) (Pavlić and Kevrić 366-367). People should be connected with nature and society since both have their source in God (Pavlić and Rukavina 75). On the other hand, according to the authors, atheistic anthropocentrism works through destructive agents or social deviations: relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism. To sum up, biblical anthropocentrism is focused on the relationship between people and God. Atheistic anthropocentrism “uses human weaknesses through its agents to diminish and dismantle the relationship between God and people” (Pavlić and Rukavina 82). The main source of atheistic anthropocentrism starts with relativism, through which people put themselves as the measure of all things. Thus, people distort their image of reality and take the right to decide what is right and wrong, good and evil. Soon, they lose the meaning of life without a moral compass, and they begin to look for meaning in pleasures or hedonism. Through consuming material goods, consumerism and



**Scheme 1** - Relations Atheistic Anthropocentrism, Relativism, Hedonism, Consumerism, and Materialism (Pavlić and Rukavina 81).

materialism create false purpose and identity, focusing people on the materialistic world (Pavlić and Rukavina 82). “Four riders of atheistic anthropocentrism can be schematically represented as four pillars through which atheistic anthropocentrism operates in society and the environment” (Pavlić and Rukavina 80).

After analyzing the conceptual meaning of anthropocentrism, differentiating between biblical and atheistic anthropocentrism, and conceptual analysis of four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism, the next step is to research the impact and influence of those agents. Most of the scientific papers and research in Croatia on the topic of *Laudato Si'* touch upon the problems of ecology, economy, theology, and sociology. This research paper uses a multidisciplinary approach, compiling different scientific branches to analyze the influence and impact of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and the environment. Some of those scientific disciplines are sociology, theology, ecology, political science, psychology, economics, and others. Since there was no comprehensive research on the impact and influence of all four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism – relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism – this research paper has high relevance. The added scientific value lies in comparing these data with *Laudato Si'*. The main research question of the paper is: How do agents of atheistic anthropocentrism influence society and the environment?

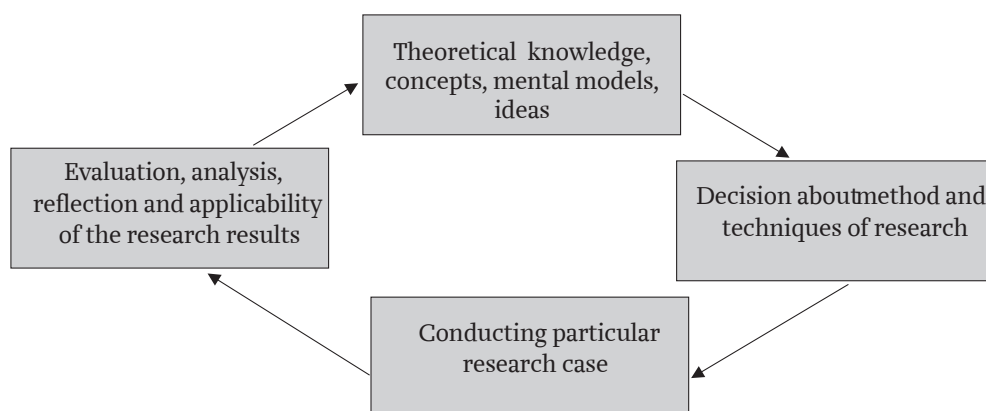
The scientific article is divided into five main parts. The first one describes the relationship between theory and practice. The main goal is to distinguish a theoretical framework or previous article about conceptual analysis, after which this article presents those theories in practice. What are the real-life examples of the influence of atheistic anthropocentrism? The other four parts of the article analyze the influence and impact of relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism as riders of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and the environment while comparing those findings with warnings from Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The research is grounded on the linear model of research design. After theoretical analysis or discussion, this model consists of hypothesis formulation and data specification (Burnham 39). The scientific paper uses qualitative research methods to analyze relevant literature, books, research, academic articles, official publications, and data in Croatian, English, and Russian, since “qualitative approaches have provided powerful insights into many important research questions” (Franco et al. 112). Those findings are then contrasted through comparative analysis with Pope Francis' data from *Laudato Si'* about his views on the influence of atheistic anthropocentrism agents.

The research paper can have some limitations due to changes in everyday social life caused by the recent COVID-19 health crisis and the conflict in Ukraine, which are still ongoing while the authors write the scientific article. Because of this, some impacts and influences of atheistic anthropocentrism could be changed in the long term. Those changes can also differ from region to region, even state to state, since different governments have different approaches and policies for managing the COVID-19 crisis and responding to the conflict in Ukraine. Future

studies could research if those contemporary crises changed the influence of atheistic anthropocentrism.

## 1. Theory and practice – interconnectedness

Understanding the conceptual meaning and theoretical framework of anthropocentrism and its agents is not enough to comprehend their impact on the world. This is why practical implications of the concepts in the real world are essential. Nonetheless, this does not reduce the importance of the theoretical framework from the first article about conceptual analysis. It is the “*blueprint* for the entire research” (Grant and Osanloo 13) or the foundation upon which the rest of the research structure can be built. A theoretical framework is used as a structure for research that contains certain theoretical phenomena and relations (Eisenhart 205). At the theoretical level, “the laws of science are formulated, which make it possible to explain and predict empirical situations, i.e., cognition of the essence of phenomena” (Пономарев and Пикулева 10). Both parts of research are important since theory and practice are interconnected, like two sides of the same coin. This relationship is symbiotic and reciprocal since “the practice cannot position itself without the theoretical questions guiding the research” (Priede 2). Theory and practice are equal because scientists must first explain something in theory or have theoretical ideas about research. After that idea is put into practice, new theories or ideas can emerge. They build on each other. By understanding the theory, researchers can decide which method or techniques are most appropriate to use and apply in particular research cases. After this, evaluation, analysis, and reflection of the results create new theoretical concepts and ideas.



**Scheme 1.** Theory - Practice Circle of Interconnectedness (authors created illustration)

As mentioned, the need for practical application does not diminish the importance of the theoretical framework. However, “In theory, there is no difference

between the theory and practice, while in practice, there is" (Brewster 202). Leonardo Da Vinci said in 1510: "Those who are in love with practice without theoretical knowledge are like the sailor who goes onto a ship without rudder or compass and who never can be certain whether he is going" (Isaacson 202). Theoretical knowledge gathered so far has to be applied in reality. "Experience teaches us how the theory might or might not work in an imperfect world, ...and experience prepares us to seek other inputs and different kinds of solutions when the imperfections of the real world bite us" (Haddad 8-9). Theories are mental models of physical reality that people use to manipulate reality and achieve objective goals. However, the only way to acquire perfect mental models is through direct experiences in reality. For Pope Francis, practice is essential. It is mentioned all over the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Even one of the four riders of atheistic anthropocentrism is mentioned with an adjective, "practical relativism," which is more dangerous than theoretical or "doctrinal relativism" (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 122). In theory, relativism is only a term that may not even exist in contemporary society. However, if relativism is still practiced today, it presents a challenge, and its impact is more significant from a practical position than from a theoretical one. In theory, society can successfully identify the challenges, but it needs to research them in everyday practice.

In this paper, the authors will explore the influence of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and the environment by looking into the real and practical implications and comparing them with warnings of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Thus, the research paper hypothesizes that four riders of atheistic anthropocentrism (relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism) devastate, dismantle, and demolish societies and nature, about which Pope Francis wrote in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The paper's research question is: How do agents of atheistic anthropocentrism influence society and the environment in practice?

## 2. Relativism

The essential feature of relativism is non-existing truth, the impossibility of establishing truth, or that there is more than one truth. Its primary function is the abolition of legal and moral absolutes, separating the individual from reality by proving that it does not even exist. According to relativism, reality does not exist; it is created through different processes in culture and society. "Language plays a critical role in cultural relativism, since language is seen as a means of categorizing, and therefore constructing, experience, and actively shaping what counts as reality. ... What counts as reality, or the social, varies according to context" (Howson 3). This argumentation is the basis for erasing the line between right and wrong, good and evil. It "leads individuals to claim that the existence of God, nature and art, the analysis of knowledge and the rest are only relative truths" (Perić 177).

Relativists often use contextualization or questions like “Is there just one way of forming rational beliefs in response to the evidence? Are the facts about justification universal, or might they vary from community to community?” (Boghossian 58). This can be defined as cultural relativism. It states that theories and arguments can only be understood inside localized contextual criteria (Norris 81). It means that “there are no universal epistemic facts and that facts about what beliefs are justified can vary from community to community” (Boghossian 59). The best example of the viciousness of the argument can be seen in the example of the Third Reich. Racist and antisemitic policies introduced by the national-socialist were both morally localized (contextualized for the Third Reich) and legalized through the *Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor* and *The Reich Citizenship Law* (Reichstag) by which some people were not truly human. Therefore, the consequences of relativism represent the potential for “increasement of immorality, crime, and social breakdown, the rise of totalitarian political movements of both the right and left, and the corrosion of Western political and cultural values” (Tasioulas 177-178). The main problem lies in the difficulty of proving the connection between relativism and such behaviors.

However, there is some research on relativism and its impact on society and the environment. Researchers have proven that people guided by moral idealism care more about ecology than representatives of relativism. Regarding the effects of relativism on society, “people with higher levels of idealism had a higher moral identity and judged social issues as more immoral. The opposite pattern was found for relativists. That is, people with low levels of relativism had a higher moral identity and judged social issues more harshly” (Zaikauskaite et al. 17-18). Relativism also has a negative impact on ecology: “It was interesting to see how the effects of relativism diminished environmental judgment and disappeared in reported environmental behaviors. Given that relativists reject universal moral principles and tend to perform decisions based on self-interested motives, it is not surprising to observe how the strength of relativism changes for variables associated with personal sacrifice” (Zaikauskaite et al. 18). Thus, moral philosophy or correct worldview based on the absolute truth, rather than interpretations and relativizations, could be used to form pro-environment attitudes and behaviors. By relativizing the world around us, people begin to behave following that relativization (specific interpretation of the world). Furthermore, people constantly change their values, beliefs, and worldviews following popular ideas just to be accepted, not regarding the morals and ethics behind those ideas. They use such ideas for short-term benefits and can even consider morals and ethics as means for their goals, not as a way of life. This could be very menacing, not only for the people themselves but for the environment. If data on climate change are continuously relativized, it can lead to a further increase in climate change due to the rejection of measures against them.

The next consequence of relativism is a situation in which everyone creates their own vision of the world and reality. If everyone lives in their own reality or isolated

world, then communication also becomes impossible because the words have different meanings in different constructed realities of individuals. Furthermore, if the truth is relative, what will happen when people meet? They would be forced to submit to another version of truth or submit others to their version of reality. It would be an eternal conflict of visions and interpretations of falsely created worlds and universes. The only peaceful solution is for each human to stay far away from others so as not to clash with those fictional realities. Thus, the main impact of relativism is the abolition of moral absolutes, which can lead to the alienation of people, disintegration of society, and anarchy. "The key debate of our time is not political or economic in nature, but cultural, moral, and, ultimately, religious. It is a conflict between two worldviews: one that believes in the existence of principles and immutable values, which God has inscribed in human nature, and one that believes that there is nothing solid and lasting, but that everything is relative to time, places and circumstances" (Perić 168). Each person views the world through their subjective glasses, and they see what is in accordance with their inner state. People are always seeking themselves in the world, which is a human limitation and weakness since the suggestive power of an idea can be false and untrue. Hence, it is the individual's duty to be truthful and base his inner self on God's, i.e., objective truth (Pilar 109).

Pope Francis makes a special warning against relativism in *Laudato Si'* since it worships "the cult of unlimited human power" (LS 122). Because of this, relativism is the first or initial agent of atheistic anthropocentrism (Pavlić and Rukavina 77). Relativism is also the beginning of selfishness and egocentrism as people start "to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labor on them or enslaving them to pay their debts" (LS 123). This agent of atheistic anthropocentrism is the inception of moral skepticism that justifies "sexual exploitation of children and abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests..., human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species, buying the organs of the poor for resale or use in experimentation, or eliminating children because they are not what their parents wanted" (LS 123).

An interesting viewpoint on relativism comes from ontology, "the most comprehensive of all sciences, insofar as it covers everything that exists" (Busse et al. 29.). Philosophically speaking, relativism is based on the anti-foundational ontology, in which there is no being outside people's cognitive mind. The origins can be found in the Enlightenment movement and the quote from René Descartes: *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am" (Watson 8). However, it is actually *vice versa*, "I am, therefore I think", *vivo vitam meam, ergo sum*, meaning "I live my life, therefore, I am" (Pilar 207), which is based on foundational ontology. Religious people have an unquenchable ontological thirst for being (Eliade 64). For Pope Francis, the *Zeitgeist* – the whole contemporary corrupted culture – is based on denying universal objective truths and principles. In such a culture, it is unsurprising that laws can only be viewed as arbitrary constructs of those in power or even obstacles that should be avoided. Life is real and true, not a relative or skeptical state of affairs, a theorem, a



persiflage, but a fact and a terrifying reality (Pilar 375-376). If there are no truth and absolute values in the world, people start to search for meaning elsewhere, like in the pleasures and self-satisfaction of their subjective (often basic) needs.

### 3. Hedonism

Hedonism often emerges after the world has been relativized. After people have relativized the world around them and are left alone without meaning and purpose, they begin to look for meaning in happiness and pleasures (Pavlić and Rukavina 77). Those pleasures are the ones that John Stuart Mill described as mere sensations, not the pleasures of the intellect, but of the feelings and imagination (Mill 8-30). The negative impact of hedonism on society and individuals is first seen in the paradox of hedonism. "This would mean that pleasure seekers are unsatisfied, and they would need even stronger pleasure stimulants, which usually lead to increasingly hazardous behavior and to disappointment, because experience blunts sensitivity and the final result is emptiness" (Veenhoven 438-439). Hedonism appears and seeks maximum enjoyment and satisfaction, ultimately leaving hedonists with emptiness, envy, greed, and jealousy in individuals, which is the perfect soil for dissatisfaction (Gotovac 328). Afterward, individuals cannot feel pleasure from a non-altruistic interest (Dietz 391). In other words, happiness cannot be a simple sum of pleasures and pains, as Jeremy Bentham suggested (Bentham 12:1-5). The root of the hedonistic paradox is in short-term pleasures that fade in the long run. In other words, the present becomes the only time of life. Everything is subordinated to a single goal: to have a beautiful and pleasant life today, filled with pleasures and diverse experiences. "*Carpe diem* is a sentence that, in the minds of our contemporaries, means the following – reap the beautiful fruits of the day, enjoy the present moment, and do not worry too much about the future. Namely, it is a culture that gives particular importance to the present moment. It limits man to the here and now. It is the present without the past and without tradition. A human being is a being that moves without a specific goal, without history, with limited memory, without valuable memories, and without the moral strength to impose meaning or direction on that history" (Gotovac 329). With no discipline and no focus on both the past (tradition) and the future, short-term pleasures can have long-term consequences, like addiction to drugs, alcohol, sexual intercourse, etc. If an individual seeks only pleasures, their path is filled with risky experimentation and making wrong friends. Furthermore, long-term pleasure consumption leads to a craving for ever-increasing levels of pleasurable stimulations, which can be self-destructive (Veenhoven 438). Living a meaningful, rich, and enjoyable life is impossible if someone is in the single-minded pursuit of stimulus-intense pleasures (Kozłowski 17). If a person wants to achieve every aspect of life for mere enjoyment and pleasure, in the long run, they are left as empty (or even emptier) than when they started their journey of seeking pleasures.



Interestingly, “the desire for a more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And, paradoxically, the acceptance of one’s negative experience is itself a positive experience” (Manson 5). “Pleasure can stay a pure pleasure only until it is enjoyed in measure by nature for sustaining a balanced life” (Pilar 78). There cannot be pleasure without a balance of pain since the pleasure that comes after pain has a longer and more profound effect. A person starving before a great meal feels a much greater pleasure in eating than someone who has already eaten. For practical hedonists, the old French saying is valid: He who runs after the pleasures, the pleasures run away from him; he who runs away from the pleasures, the pleasures run after him. Nature doesn’t allow one-sidedness regarding pleasure and pain since it is always in equilibrium (Pilar 78-79). Suffering is a part of life. People come to this world through birth pains and leave it by death. Pain is part of everyday life, and it is essential to be able to handle difficult times when they arrive. Running away from pain is nothing more than a source of cowardice. Where there is life, there is pain. When people cannot achieve perfection through passion, they start to look for it in pleasures or eudaimonism – a point of view in ethics according to which happiness (satisfaction) is the purpose of human life and the meaning of all human activity (Hrvatska enciklopedija). The development of life and the natural innate desire to improve are stumbling nowadays as people are trying to perfect pleasures, not their lives. Such life values lead to the weakening of culture or cultural degeneration, especially in the Western Christian world. How did this situation emerge? An anti-hedonistic attitude was part of the Christian world for a long time. It was based on the human desire for affirmation and bliss through patient endurance and suffering in imitation of Jesus. After the Reformation and Renaissance, the old spirit of rationalism reemerged, with hedonism lurking behind. Protestantism focused the goal of human lives on this world, and with care only for this life and this world, hedonism came back to life in full, especially in Anglo-Saxons’ ideas, like utilitarianism. In the 20th century, this was accompanied by a rise of political ideologies, especially modern liberalism, which is fueled by the idea of freedom and an independent individual who is entitled to live alone, according to his happiness and interests, and in this manner, he is serving the community (Pilar 308-309). It would be interesting to compare political ideologies and how (or if) they promote some agents of atheistic anthropocentrism.

Pleasure-seeking individuals can bring suffering and pain to the family or the broader community if addictions start to increase over time. Hedonism can undermine social cohesiveness, ethics, morals, critical thinking, and solidarity (Haynes 59). This can have a more significant impact, especially on political participation, since hedonistic citizens are less likely to be participatory citizens (Valadares et al. 979). People enjoying their pleasures without concern for others and their needs make an atomized, unsustainable, and selfish society. They are “falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana” (Fisher 23). Hedonism is an obstacle to the progress of the individual and

society in general since it can lead to idleness. Hedonists are often depicted as passive lotus-eaters, and due to that passiveness, pleasure-seeking is considered the opposite of active involvement (Veenhoven 439). Hedonism, in this sense, is misleading individuals and making them feel meaningless, lost, and insignificant.

Hedonism and the next deviation of atheistic anthropocentrism – consumerism, have combined influence on the environment. Because of the constant and intense seeking of pleasure, hedonistic individuals are the source of over-consumption and pollution of the environment (Haynes 59). “The environmental argument holds that hedonism gives rise to over-consumption and that this will add to the ongoing depletion of natural resources and consequently will hasten the destruction of the environment. Following this line of argument, it is suggested that hedonism reduces one’s awareness of danger because self-indulgences smothers awareness and critical thinking. Similar claims are made about the deleterious effects of hedonism on society. The daily treadmill of conspicuous consumption impoverishes the social quality in many ways, undermining the morals and destroying the work ethic within society. These views are often presented as part of a broader critique of consumer society and modernization” (Veenhoven 438). Consumerism is a continuation of the negative impact on nature alongside hedonism. All the agents of atheistic anthropocentrism work in tandem and simultaneously mutually support negative impacts on society and the environment.

Pope Francis mentions hedonism by warning about seeking pleasure and satisfaction in the relativized world. Relativism and hedonism are interconnected due to “the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs” (LS 123). Furthermore, *Laudato Si’* precisely realizes the coherence between hedonism and consumerism since “many people know that our current progress and the mere amassing of things and pleasures are not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, yet they feel unable to give up what the market sets before them” and “making the greatest changes in consumer habits” (LS 209). These implications are mostly about the hedonistic influence on society, but Pope Francis also makes it clear that hedonism and consumerism have an impact on environmental pollution due to the over-extraction of resources in the Southern Hemisphere and “export of raw materials to satisfy markets in the industrialized north, which has caused harm locally, as for example in mercury pollution in gold mining or sulfur dioxide pollution in copper mining” (LS 51). The constant process of *hedonization* often works in tandem with the need to keep pleasures constantly satisfied with things, which summons a new agent of atheistic anthropocentrism – consumerism.

## 4. Consumerism

After the relativistic worldviews are satisfied with pleasures, individuals often need to consume goods to find a sense of self-worth in this consummation and consumption. "Consumerism is a global problem driving global environmental change as the costs of consumption (such as the exploitation of people, the destruction of ecosystems, and pollution from wasteful extraction and harmful disposal) are externalized out of sight - distanced through lengthening global supply chains, and hidden behind discounted retail prices that fail to account for social and environmental costs" (Lister 10). Furthermore, due to globalization and translocation of production in the states where the labor, workforce, and inputs are cheaper, most of the waste generation is not in consumer societies but in the third-world states where most of the production and manufacturing stages occur (Roach et al. 23-25). Moving the production of goods further away from areas of consumption through economic globalization and world market deregulation creates geographical disconnection in causes and effects of environmental damage. "Through distancing, multinational corporations cast ecological shadows of rising consumption as they deflect costs onto vulnerable ecosystems and populations, creating global patterns of harm" (Lister 10). Nonetheless, societies affected by consumerism are the source of this negative impact on the environment since the main challenge and the issue is not merely in manufacturing but also in consumption, which is dislocated from the demand and consumers willing to consume those goods (Orecchia and Zoppoli 10). Moreover, consumerism is a global threat due to the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of animal and plant species, which has been clearly stated in the United Nations reports: "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history – and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating" (United Nations). Pope Francis emphasizes this problem in *Laudato Si'*: "At the same time, we have a sort of 'super-development' of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation" (LS 109). "To find ever new ways of despoiling nature, purely for the sake of new consumer items and quick profit, would be, in human terms, less worthy and creative, and more superficial" (LS 192).

The impact of consumerism is not just on the environment. It can be seen at the root of some dangerous behavior in individuals, such as 1) potential poverty due to overconsumption and debt increase from buying unnecessary goods; 2) personal relations become unimportant because people are investing in their standard of living through earning more; 3) increase in crime rate due to thefts and robberies of expensive goods (Shukla 7). Psychological health deteriorates when one's desires are not met, and different cases can occur, such as depression (Shukla 5). "Consumer culture has engendered deep cynicism, individualism, competition, envy, and inertia" while simultaneously creating "lethargy, anxiety, and self-doubt that comes with centering one's life around the marketplace" (Fitchett & Cronin 6). This also affects society, making it less secure and prosperous while transforming political

participation and identities in societies. Solidarity between people is recognized by the consumption power. "Consumers' social identity stems, above all, from their capacity to choose, purchase, and consume products that have been designed by firms for them" (Dubuisson-Quellier 1866). States can promote consumer culture and create consumer identity based on belonging through the activity of consumption as a channel for social inclusion (Valadares et al. 979). Through this process, a new Consumer Republic is made in which mass consumption is a means to increase the country's wealth (Cohen 299-319). It is all encompassed by consumption ideology, defined "as ideas and ideals related to consumerism, which are manifested in consumers' social representations and expressed in their communicative actions in the marketplace" (Schmitt et al. 75). In this ideology, individuals share social forms, behaviors, styles of communication and collective "consumer" actions. It "implies that consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, think and act as ideologues because they are living in a consumerist society" (Schmitt et al. 75). Zygmunt Bauman concluded that society of consumers is based merely on the capacity to consume, and it evaluates (penalizes and rewards) its members based on the amount of consumption (Bauman 52-53). Then, according to Pope Francis, "isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness" (LS 219). "Thus, a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism" (LS 232).

In institutionalized consumerism, atomized consumers are left to care for themselves, competing with others who will consume and possess more, often useless, goods. To overcome such savory scenarios and find meaning in life, consumers are becoming, or continuing to be, hedonists, trying to find meaning in pleasure. Ironically, the main goal of consumerism is not to satisfy the needs of consumers but to always keep consumers empty and unsatisfied so they can constantly consume more (Bauman 99). "Dependence, addiction, bingeing, and compulsive consumption can be thought of as risky or harmful uses of otherwise pleasurable experiences, like using alcohol, drugs and having sex" (Kozlowski, 14), which connects consumerism with hedonism. "Many people know that our current progress and the mere accumulation of things and pleasures are not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, but they feel incapable of giving up what the market puts in front of them" (LS 209). This market placement of various short-term pleasures in front of people is connected with consumerism, which Pope Francis directly mentions on several occasions in *Laudato Si'*. "Consumerism actually makes our country less rich and beautiful, more and more limited and gray" (LS 34), "giving priority to short-term profit and private interest" (LS 184), which is also a common feature of hedonism. Furthermore, new generations "have grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism and affluence, which makes it difficult to develop other habits" (LS 209). Venomous and addictive consumerism is re-educating modern young generations in finding value and the meaning of life in constant consumption. As Jeffrey Goines, a fictional character in the movie *12 Monkeys*, says: "There's the television. It's all right there – all right there. Look, listen,

kneel, pray. Commercials! We're not productive anymore. We don't make things anymore. It's all automated. What are we for, then? We're consumers. Buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen. But if you don't buy a lot of stuff, if you don't, what are you then, I ask you? What? Mentally ill" (Gilliam 18:51). Therefore, "enjoyable as it might be while it lasts, it probably goes without saying that the life of a mere consumer lacks any real meaning and purpose" (Murray 248).

The main problem is that state institutions, media, and entertainment industries promote the shallow type of personal pleasure, creating consensus on "enjoying our consumerist culture, frequently buying things that do not last and then buying newer versions of the same to replace them" (Murray 181). There is no place for ethical or moral consumerism. Current market structures and mainstream marketing emphasize how "contemporary capitalism creates conditions in which ethical consumption is costly in terms of money, time and effort" (Coffin and Egan-Wyer 105). Interestingly, the word *consume* etymologically means "to destroy by separating into parts which cannot be reunited, as by burning or eating, hence destroy the substance, annihilate" (Online Etymology Dictionary). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as an agent of atheistic anthropocentrism, consumerism devours individuals, societies, and ecosystems.

## 5. Materialism

Materialism is a continuation of consumerism since "high-level materialists place material wealth at the core of their lives, have a strong desire for expensive consumer goods, and hope to obtain social status and social recognition through material products, rather than through self-awareness or carefully planned consumption, usually lack of control over consumption can lead to irrational consumer attitudes and behaviors" (Shuxiang and Yaozhong 361). Interestingly, consumerism and materialism support and evolve together. Consumerism has changed in the last few years due to online shopping, digital nomads, etc. However, "materialism remains a robust construct, which continues to adapt to the contemporary dynamics and can continue to be used to understand consumers' engagement with consumption into the future" (Atanasova and Eckhardt 498). Materialism correlates with consumerism, and it can create problems for individuals, such as poor money management, accumulation of debt, and gambling problems. All this, together with hedonism, can cause severe dangers to the health of an individual, such as addictions (cigarettes, alcohol, etc.), but also risky cosmetic surgeries to match beauty standards (Shuxiang and Yaozhong 361-362). Furthermore, a materialistic lifestyle, in the long run, reduces happiness, life satisfaction, self-awareness, self-actualization, and quality of relationships and increases levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Shuxiang and Yaozhong 360). Interestingly, a higher level of materialistic behavior among adolescents was a significant variable and longitudinal predictor of delinquency (Shek et al. 10), which is usually accompanied by egocentrism. On the other

hand, the economic system of capitalism encourages materialism since materialists work harder and longer to earn more money to buy luxury goods, and higher production leads to higher profits, but this leaves people emotionally exhausted and indifferent to other parts of social life, like family.

The general social impact of materialism is disregarding the public good for personal gratification and reducing the level of solidarity (Duh 30). Materialism stands in contrast to altruistic values that encourage prosocial behavior. It was proven that materialism causes lower individual and societal well-being. "These findings suggest that the promotion of materialistic messages through media and advertising do not only have negative consequences for the personal well-being of individuals but also for the welfare of society as a whole" (Moldes and Ku 1414). Furthermore, "materialism can also lead to hoarding. Individuals with this condition may collect items that have little monetary value - such as stacks of newspapers, buttons, or other items commonly viewed as *junk*. Still, when people hoard, they place an emotional attachment to material items rather than turning inward to meet their needs" (Hartney). Interestingly, new researchers discussed how the COVID-19 crisis has shifted the focus of people from materialistic towards a life of self-acceptance and sharing quality time with loved ones (Moldes Andrés). However, these are short-term data during the pandemic, not long-term sustainable value shifts.

Several studies have shown that a materialistic person is "more self-directed, less helpful, less charitable, often prefers individual activities and less physical contact, more competitive and less cooperative; high-level materialists tend to increase their personal material wealth and reduce material wealth by paying more attention to wealth, achievement, power, and status resulting in reduced prosocial behavior" (Shuxiang and Yaozhong 363). Greater levels of a materialistic lifestyle and culture can have partial positive economic influence, for example, economic growth (e.g., China), but it can have negative impacts, such as the occurrence of unethical behavior (Bakırtaş et al. 132-133). People cannot find the essence of life if they only run after material possessions or money. Thomas Masaryk, president of Czechoslovakia, said how people who are striving for wealth and even achieve it can become slaves to their wealth (Pilar 301). Material life is vital as a means of life but not as a final goal and the essence of life.

Materialism erodes and endangers the individual, society, and the environment. "Pursuit of the materialistic goals of financial success, image and fame is grounded in conspicuous consumption and the accumulation of high-status goods, such as sports cars with low fuel economy or high energy widescreen televisions; by necessity, pursuit of the materialistic dream involves an increased negative impact on the environment, whereas the pursuit of self-fulfillment and connection to others does not" (Hurst et al. 257). Researchers have gathered the results of several analyses which have "shown that when respondents have stronger materialistic and egoistic values, they attach more importance to high-tech products (such as televisions,



mobile phones and cars), attach less importance to the low-tech products (e.g., a national trust membership, a compost bin) and they are less likely to say they intend to adopt a range of pro-environmental behaviors related to home energy, transport and food” (Gatersleben et al. 32). Furthermore, materialism is negatively associated with both pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. “Materialists are less likely to believe that humans need to change their behavior to protect the environment and are more likely to engage in higher levels of environmentally damaging behavior themselves. ... It seems that materialistic values are equally damaging to the environment regardless of who endorses them, and that materialists may represent a particularly important-to-reach, but relatively obstinate, population: the more materialistic people are, the worse their environmental behavior is likely to be, but the less likely they are to believe that the world is in danger and that they should alter their behavior to protect the environment” (Hurst et al. 265). Basically, the more people are moral and altruistic, the more they are willing to save and take action to preserve nature. The cause of evil lies in anthropocentrism, according to which man is outside and above nature, not bound by the laws that govern the rest of nature, and, therefore, can enjoy all of nature without restrictions and without punishment (Pilar 257).

Pope Francis gave a great conclusion about the influence of materialism on the environment: “If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress” (LS 78). *Laudato Si'* points out the danger to the environment and the interconnection between materialism and consumerism, “the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit” (LS 106). On the other hand, *Laudato Si'* also reflects on the negative social impact of materialism: “Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational” (LS 106). In other words, materialistic, consumed possessions are starting to possess the possessors, alienating them from their true altruistic inner happiness and clean environment.

## Conclusion

The research has pointed out how agents of atheistic anthropocentrism are interconnected and often overlap while influencing society, the environment, and individuals. The paper’s central research question is: How do four atheistic anthropocentrism agents influence society and the environment? The impact of atheistic anthropocentrism on society and nature is real. Society is faced with the relativization of absolute universal postulates, social deprivation through egoism and envy, a materialization of human relationships, a potential increase in crime rates, a decrease of solidarity, empathy, and pro-social behavior, discarding altruistic values, and an expanding sense



of meaninglessness in society. Impact on the environment is seen through relativization of data about climate changes, inexhaustible and unlimited exploitation of natural resources, disturbance of eco-balance, extinction of animal and plant species, increase of pollution in all parts of the world, and reduction in green pro-environmental behavior. Research has shown several impacts of agents of atheistic anthropocentrism on the individual, which were not foreseen in the hypothesis, such as a sense of loss, alienation, and isolation in their interpretations of the world under significant influence of media and social networks, which promote consumerism and materialism. Individuals are seeking short-term profits and pleasures, experimenting with alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and physical relationships, losing their meaning and even health and psychological strength in the long run. To sum up the contemporary state of the Western world in the words of Tyler Durden: "Our great war is a spiritual war; our great depression is our lives" (Fincher 1:10:52).

Each agent of atheistic anthropocentrism was mentioned and covered in *Laudato Si'*, making the encyclical even more important and comprehensive for contemporary world challenges. In the context of this research, Pope Francis's main point is that "the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet" (LS 48). We can conclude that Pope Francis understands global threats of atheistic anthropocentrism and articulates them precisely. Understanding the problems and challenges is the first step to overcoming them. Communicating and emphasizing them through the encyclical is the second step. The third one is always crucial – taking action and successfully confronting the current impacts and influences of four agents or riders of atheistic anthropocentrism. Without strategic long-term goals and short (and midterm) tactical actions, everything is just empty words on paper.

Regarding future studies, the research paper found several topics that could be interesting for further analysis:

- 1) Influence of capitalism (or capital-centrism) on the environment and society, through observations emphasized in *Laudato Si'*.
- 2) Empirical research about the influence of relativism in society.
- 3) Creating (or shaping) the identity of new generations through consumerism.
- 4) Role of technology in human alienation and *Laudato Si'*.
- 5) Methods, remedies, means, and ways of facing and overcoming negative impacts and influence of relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism on society and the environment.
- 6) Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and Ukraine conflict on four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism.

## 7) How do political ideologies influence four agents of atheistic anthropocentrism?

By understanding and communicating the impacts and influences of atheistic anthropocentrism through its agents, relativism, hedonism, consumerism, and materialism, the next logical step is to research remedies and means (actions) to overcome those impacts.

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