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STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE



23/4 (2025)

Integral Ecology and Youth: Redefining Lifestyles for Socio-Ecological Change. Review of *Creation and Care: Young People, Vulnerable Groups, and Integral Lifestyles* by M.M. Brgles

Ekologia Integralna i Młodzież. Redefiniowanie stylów życia na rzecz zmian społeczno-ekologicznych. Recenzja książki autorstwa Miriam Mary Brgles pt. „*Creation and Care: Young People, Vulnerable Groups, and Integral Lifestyles*”

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Received: 15 Apr, 2025; Revised 19 May, 2025; Accepted: 29 May, 2025; Pre-published: 03 Jun, 2025

The scientific monograph, *Creation and Care: Young People, Vulnerable Groups, and Integral Lifestyles* by Dr. Miriam Mary Brgles, extends the research initiated in the *CRO Laudato Si' project* (Turza and Brgles 2023). The research presented in the book was conducted during the author's post-doctoral studies at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas from 2021 to 2023 (Brgles and Colombi 2023). It explores and describes new youth lifestyles and their interactions with vulnerable groups and people in need, rooted in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on integral ecology. The study employs an interdisciplinary, community-based participatory research approach, combining sociology, theology, and arts-based research to address the socio-environmental crisis highlighted in Pope Francis's encyclicals *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).

Dr. Brgles's book particularly emphasizes how changes in youth lifestyles, rooted in care for the environment and others, can mitigate the climate crisis. The book begins with a thoughtful Foreword, Acknowledgments, and Introduction, followed by



Chapter One, where the author lays the theoretical groundwork by examining the concept of integral ecology presented in Pope Francis's two latest encyclicals. The first chapter also explains how the *CRO Laudato Si'* project was inspired by *Laudato Si'* encyclical and pursued the dual purpose

of highlighting the importance of this CST document and inspiring practices that follow the guidelines provided in it. In the second half of the chapter, Dr. Brgles justifies the focus of the research on youth and vulnerable groups by referring to some of the most pertinent findings of the *CRO Laudato Si'* project, such as youth's readiness for change in the context of care for the environment and people in need, their difficulties in cultivating such habits consistently, and their role as the main multipliers of sustainable habits in their families (Brstilo Lović, Brgles, and Mravunac 2024). Finally, the chapter lists the main global youth initiatives of environmental action and correctly points out that in Croatia – as in other Central and Eastern European countries – the topics of sustainability still lack the needed attention.

Chapter Two of the book is dedicated to defining and elaborating on the key concepts of the study, including “creation,” “care,” “Anthropocene,” “sustainable development,” and “integral human development,” with an emphasis on the role of Louis Joseph Lebreton, OP (Gasper 2021; Gasper and Keleher 2021). In addition, this part of the monograph provides an overview of the sources of threats to sustainability and the factors contributing to the socio-environmental crisis. The author discusses the United Nations General Assembly's (2015) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and argues that religion (Sadowski 2021) has the potential to contribute to the promotion and implementation of these goals. Finally, the readers are introduced to the target groups of the study (youth and vulnerable social groups/people in need), as well as the main characteristics of the research project, such as general objectives, research questions, project duration, and the mode of dissemination of research results. At the heart of this chapter, Dr. Brgles presents a new paradigm of integral ecology, which underscores the innovative, holistic approach of the monograph to the socio-environmental crisis. Furthermore, based on this

paradigm, the author proposes a new concept of ‘integral lifestyles.’

Next, Chapter Three outlines the principles of CST relevant to the study. First, the principle of the common good is defined and J. Maritain's (1946) distinction between an individual and a person is described. Furthermore, the chapter discusses how CST, particularly through the teachings of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, frames the ecological crisis as a profound moral issue, rooted in the degradation of human dignity and the natural environment. It also highlights the CST's emphasis on the principles of solidarity and fraternity, advocating for a unified response to the socio-environmental crisis. The first two research questions are listed at the end of the chapter: *1. How do young people distinguish between integral ecology and caring for our common home, and “superficial or apparent ecology”? 2. How do young people perceive the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor and how do they interpret it?* These research questions are well-supported by the undertaken analysis and the essential insights of the two latest Pope Francis's encyclicals, that “everything is connected” (*Laudato Si'*) and that “no one is saved alone” (*Fratelli Tutti*).

To continue, Chapter Four focuses on K. Wojtyła's (2021) theory of participation, forms of youth's civic engagement, and its benefits on the micro, meso, and macro societal levels. The author begins by introducing the readers to the fundamental thesis of the participation theory, which states that by participating with others, one discovers an important dimension of oneself as a person. Dr. Brgles emphasizes K. Wojtyła's (2021) insight that from the perspective of the common good, community and person are inseparable in participation. On the contrary, participation can be limited by individualism or totalitarianism. Next, two forms of youth participation are discussed in the chapter: academic service-learning and volunteering. Among the main motivational functions of volunteering, the researcher

has chosen values as the main focus of her conducted study, because values motivate community-strengthening actions and help to face the challenges. In the end, from the analysis of the fourth chapter, the author derived the third research question of the study: 3) *What forms of interaction between young and vulnerable social groups are applied and within which context (work on projects, in associations, participation in events, continuous or one-time volunteering, etc.)?*

Following this, Chapter Five explores the socio-ecological crisis from a sociological perspective. It begins by addressing the need to overcome human-nature dualism, a central theme in sociological discussions on environmental issues. The author first provides an overview of the reflective perspective of Fischer-Kowalski and Schafartzik (2020) on the history of how this relationship has been interpreted in sociology, transitioning from viewing society as free from natural compulsions and subduing nature to recognizing the co-evolutionary relationship between the two. Another focus of the chapter is the need to integrate two seemingly opposing perspectives—social constructionism and critical realism—to better understand socio-ecological issues. Dr. Brgles acknowledges the importance of social constructionism for enhancing our understanding of socially mediated knowledge and practices as distinct from environmental phenomena. However, she rightly points out that social constructionism must be complemented by critical realism to interpret these phenomena independently. The chapter proceeds with presenting the works of such sociologists as A. Giddens and U. Beck who also emphasized the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems in their theories of risk society and reflexive modernization. Finally, this part of the monograph concludes with a call for deeper interdisciplinary collaboration to address the socio-environmental crisis.

In Chapter Six, the focus shifts to the redefinition of lifestyles as a central aspect of addressing the socio-ecological crisis. Dr. Brgles redefines lifestyles through Pierpaolo Donati's relational theory and Margaret Archer's critical realism, emphasizing the importance of "relational goods". The necessity to redefine the concept of lifestyles is justified by referencing the CST, Lebert's hierarchy of needs, and the works of Jensen (2007), and Sadowski (2021) among others. The author suggests that conventional definitions of lifestyles should be expanded in a way that intangible goods are recognized next to material goods; reflexivity and sympathetic introspection are acknowledged together with attitudes and consumption; tastes are studied together with ethical values; and the study of behavior is complemented by the role of purposeful action, creativity, and belonging in the pursuit of the common good. The chapter concludes by once more highlighting the crucial importance of new lifestyles since they are essential for the creation of a culture of moderation, capable of enabling a social transformation away from the current socio-ecological crisis. In the end, the remaining research questions are derived: 4. *What are the characteristics of new lifestyles based on integral ecology, and what is the role of young people in promoting new habits?* and 5. *What meanings do young people attach to new lifestyles?*

The relevance of the undertaken study is demonstrated in Chapter Seven by presenting the selected results of quantitative research conducted in the EU, focusing on the Eurobarometer (2019) and the European Values Study (Ježovita 201). According to the data of Eurobarometer, in general, the concern of EU citizens about climate change is increasing. However, as thoroughly documented in the chapter, a significant correlation exists between higher education levels and greater personal engagement in sustainability efforts. What is most concerning, according to the author, is that the level of actual engagement in

sustainability actions lags considerably behind the concern levels, even among the young and educated respondents. Similarly, the results of the European Values Survey showed that in Croatia there exists a noticeable lack of social engagement and a preference for economic growth over environmental protection (Ježovita 2019). Consequently, the author concludes that the disparity between awareness, concern, and action highlights the need for strategies to foster greater participation in environmental initiatives, particularly among young people, which her research aimed to address.

Moving to Chapter Eight, it describes the research methodology. The author adopts a comprehensive and reflexive approach to research design and attentively considers theoretical, methodological, and ethical aspects, especially when working with vulnerable social groups and people in need. The study is conceived as a community-based participatory research. The research was conducted in Croatia and Italy, focusing on interactions between youth, acknowledged for their activities in parishes, volunteer groups, civil society organizations, and vulnerable social groups, particularly migrants. Data collection involved qualitative methods, including a total of 92 semi-structured interviews and arts-based research (ABR), ensuring participants were active collaborators. It is important to point out that the research methodology of the study is innovative and ABR methods had not yet been applied to research related to the *Laudato Si'* encyclical (2015). Additionally, in her research, Dr. Brgles strictly adhered to ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality. Among the limitations that the study faced, the author mentions a restricted scope of the research, the non-inclusion of other subgroups from vulnerable social groups, a substantial difference in samples from Croatia and Italy, and data interpretation limitations. These limitations

were mitigated by highlighting the importance of reflexivity in understanding and addressing them.

The following Chapter Nine presents the analysis and interpretation of results. Dr. Brgles explains that the thematic analysis was conducted following the five research questions. Axial coding initially organized deductive codes into categories from interview themes. Revisiting the transcripts, an inductive-abductive approach was then used to refine and develop new codes, ensuring they aligned with the data and research objectives. The chapter starts with presenting and interpreting the results from the responses to the first two research questions, which were divided into 4 categories: role of education and sources of information; self-assessment regarding familiarity with the topic; knowledge about the engagement of the Catholic Church in ecological and social questions; and worldviews about the care for the people in need. Key findings from this thematic analysis showed that young participants in Croatia mostly got their information about the socio-ecological crisis from social networks, trusting these sources more than their European counterparts and valuing credible scientific content. Furthermore, their deeper understanding of ecological issues, particularly within the context of CST is stronger among those actively engaged in Catholic communities.

The next theme – youth's interactions with vulnerable groups/persons in need – was divided into the following categories: volunteering individually and as part of an organization; experiences and stories of volunteering; and reasons and meaning of volunteering. The main findings demonstrated that young people viewed individual assistance as small acts of kindness, while organized volunteering involved diverse roles in associations, often connected to their studies or personal experiences. Motivations for volunteering included socialization, empathy, personal growth, family values, and the desire to help vulnerable groups, with many participants

emphasizing the reciprocal benefits and deep personal fulfillment from their actions. The final part of the ninth chapter presented and analyzed findings from the responses to the fourth and fifth research questions, related to lifestyles. Key findings were that participants from environmentally conscious families had developed small sustainable habits, like waste separation and using public transport, often influenced by family, education, or youth communities. Their sustainable behaviors were linked to healthy lifestyles, social interactions, cost-effectiveness, and a sense of responsibility while honoring non-working Sundays was driven by solidarity, family time, and religious values.

In the last part, Chapter Ten, some of the results of art-based research are shared. They include a fiction piece, a photograph and a comment on it, and a reflection essay. In the introductory chapter, Dr. Brgles mentions that due to diverse formats, it was not possible to include all the ABR visuals from the study, but they were displayed at events that were organized as part of the project. In addition, they could also be shared by adding web links to their digital displays in the Appendix.

The monograph's most significant strength is its interdisciplinary approach, which effectively merges contributions from sociology, CST, philosophy, and environmental studies to offer a holistic view of the socio-environmental crisis. This research is innovative because it pioneers the application of ABR methods to CST topics, which deepens the qualitative data, and empowers participants, especially those from vulnerable social groups. Moreover, the central focus and the most important innovation of the book is a redefinition of lifestyles, emphasizing the significant role of youth in climate activism and the care for the vulnerable, all viewed through the perspective of integral ecology. Finally, the inclusion of reflexivity as a key component of the research process is another strength, as it adds depth to the analysis and

provides transparency in the interpretation of the findings.

The book is well-written and has a clear and logical structure that guides the reader throughout the text. The content is rich and complex, offering an opportunity for readers to deepen their understanding and engage with more advanced ideas. The interdisciplinary nature of the monograph offers a broad and insightful exploration of key topics such as integral ecology, youth engagement, and social vulnerability. There is a smooth progression between diverse themes in the book, which ensures its coherence. Building on this strength, further highlighting the theoretical interconnections could deepen the reader's understanding of the broader framework that connects these discussions. To continue, the integration of ABR methods is another outstanding aspect of the monograph, bringing a creative and innovative dimension to the research. Expanding on how these methods specifically shape the findings—particularly through a more detailed discussion of the analysis of participants' creative outputs in Chapter Ten—could provide additional clarity and insight. Strengthening the explicit connection between ABR methodology and the theoretical frameworks might also further support the book's main argument. Finally, the study's focus on the socio-environmental link is an especially valuable contribution, highlighting the important interconnections between social and ecological dimensions. Expanding on this perspective within the research design could further enhance the study, ensuring that the methodological approach aligns even more closely with its theoretical foundations.

Another significant contribution of Dr. Brgles' study is designing it as a community-based participatory research. Such a methodological approach engaged youth in the research, thereby fostering a sense of agency and responsibility in addressing the socio-ecological crisis. However, the selected sampling method is worth reconsidering. While focusing on already

active youth provided valuable insights, it could have shaped the results, as those individuals may have held certain values that do not necessarily reflect the broader views of all young people.

In conclusion, *Creation and Care: Young People, Vulnerable Groups, and Integral Lifestyles* is an important and relevant contribution to interdisciplinary studies on ways to address the socio-environmental crisis. The monograph provides an up-to-date perspective on how young people can play an essential role in addressing the crisis, following the principles of integral ecology outlined in Catholic Social Teaching. The combination of different fields, creative use of arts-based research methods, and thoughtful analysis of existing research make this work useful for scholars, professionals, and policymakers. The book is likely to interest a wide range of people, including researchers, teachers, and anyone who cares about the future of sustainable development and social justice. Its theoretical contributions, combined with its empirical rigor, ensure that it will be a key text in discussions on the role of youth in fostering new, sustainable lifestyles.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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