On Earth: Relational Anthropocentrism in Creation Care[1]

ALESSANDRO PICCIRILLO

Abstract

In evaluating environmental ethics in Western thought, the definitions and arguments of greatest importance come from consequential, deontological, and ecocentric approaches. These approaches have strengths and weaknesses. This article aims at addressing the issues at stake by introducing the concept of relational anthropocentrism based on multiperspectivalism.

I. *Anthropocene*

Human presence on earth is so extensive and its activity so massive that it significantly conditions the planet's internal cycles. It is estimated that today's world population is around 7.6 billion people, with a gradually increasing concentration in metropolitan urban areas. In 1950 the world population was around 2.5 billion; estimates say that it will almost quadruple within the next century.[2]

[1] The following is an adaptation of Alessandro Piccirillo, "Sulla Terra: Elementi per un'etica della cura del Creato," *Studi di Teologia: Supplemento* 16 (2018): 4–30.

[2] See Population Division, "The Speed of Urbanization around the World," *Population Facts 2018.1. The United Nations*, Online: https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-PopFacts_2018-1.pdf.

When one tries to manage numbers of such magnitude, it becomes clear that the problem of resources is a concrete challenge. The issue is not just how to feed everyone in environmental scenarios that are increasingly subject to major climate changes.[3] It is also essential to understand the ecological sustainability of such an anthropic presence on the planet. The footprint left by human activities has changed the face of the earth, together with its interdependent balances, to such a degree that the planet's capacity for adaptation and resilience has been altered. Faced with a large-scale and irresponsible demands for land resources, the earth system has no time either to reproduce what has been removed or to re-create the previous conditions of comparative abundance. The loss of these resources constitutes a failure to provide not only for immediate human needs but also for those of other entities whose existence is increasingly threatened.

A visible example is Lake Aral, located between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the fourth largest lake in the world, with a surface area of over 68 km^2. Since 1960, this navigable lake has experienced one of the greatest human-made environmental disasters. During this time, it has gradually and almost completely dried up. In the 1950s, the Soviet Union (USSR) carried out major operations to tap the Aral waters to irrigate the Uzbek cotton plantations. However, the water withdrawal was so disproportionate that the formerly moderate continental climate of the lake area has become increasingly extreme, with very wide temperature ranges (104° F in summer, −4° F in winter), and significantly arid. This development has led to sand storms and the gradual sedimentation of salt and toxic substances (heavily used in crops), creating a poisonous mix that has made the lake and the surrounding area unsuitable for life. Aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna have diminished dramatically. Local populations have experienced a sizeable increase in respiratory and renal diseases.[4] The region now made inhospitable has created environmental refugees, especially among those who made a living from fishing—a work network of about forty thousand people who provided one-sixth of the fish consumed in the former Soviet Union. This disaster was not only to be expected, but it was also premeditated and included in a subsequent plan of conversion of the area into rice paddies. However, since the 1990s, with cotton cultivation in freefall, crumbling infrastructure, and unfulfilled agreements, the collection of water already in short supply has become an instrument of political tension and dispute

[3] See FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018: Building Climate Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition* (Rome: FAO, 2018), 37–78.

[4] Augusto Spuri, *Cambiamenti climatici: Tra facili allarmismi e pericolose sottovalutazioni* (Turin: Claudiana, 2018), 91.

between the states of the former Soviet Union. The total disappearance of water is expected by 2025.[5] A framework of sociopolitical instability has emerged as a fitting conclusion to this ecological disaster.

Another example is in Syria. Among the various studies on the factors that caused the ongoing civil war, there is one published by the National Academy of Sciences (USA) that investigates the significant climate change in an area struck by abnormal drought between 2007 and 2010. This drought, the worst ever recorded in Syria, caused a massive loss of subsistence crops that generated an extensive migration of farming families (about 1.5 million people) to urban centers, many of which were already crowded with Iraqi refugees (estimated at around 1.2–1.5 million). The inevitable result was the escalation of social tensions due to increasing scarcity of resources, efficient infrastructure, and jobs on the one hand, and the increase in crime, illegal activities, and disinterest on the part of the Assad regime on the other. These were key ingredients for the ensuing sociopolitical conflict. By studying climate trends over a century (rainfall, temperatures, atmospheric pressure), the researchers collected data and results that give a clear picture: the drought is of human origin. The cause? An aggressive agricultural policy that depleted the territory and the hydrogeological resources. The government of Hafez al-Assad advocated unsustainable policies to increase agricultural production and irrigation projects (with subsidies in the form of oil quotas to its supporters). These policies exploited the limited land and water resources to such a degree that the groundwater was dangerously reduced by draining rivers and making crops dependent on rainfall alone. Once the aquifers or groundwaters were exhausted, at the first sign of drought, there were no water reserves left, and agricultural production in the northeast collapsed. Almost all the livestock was lost, the vegetation was devastated, and the population started to suffer from diseases linked to malnutrition. To make matters worse, Bashar al-Assad began to cut funds and subsidies.[6] Migration was the only solution.

These two different examples present several related critical issues caused by the decisive action of man on the natural cycles leading to pollution, impoverishment, and instability. In both cases, a particular type of behavior towards the environment caused social injustice, and a specific type of social

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[5] Michael Wines, "Grand Soviet Scheme for Sharing Water in Central Asia Is Foundering," *New York Times*, December 12, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/09/world/grand-soviet-scheme-for-sharing-water-in-central-asia-is-foundering.html?pagewanted=all.

[6] Colin P. Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark. A. Cane, et al., "Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112.11 (March 17, 2015): 3241–46, doi:10.1073/pnas.1421533112.

injustice exacerbated the ecological crisis. The interaction is very close. This is not a particularly new phenomenon: the ancient Romans also polluted and devastated the environment with massive deforestation. What makes it contemporary are its immense proportions and the contribution of advanced technology, which combined to produce sudden and unpredictable effects on the environment.

II. *Pollution and Deforestation*

There is still some resistance in the scientific community to the theory of human activity as the origin of climate change. However, the data that prove it are continually accumulating. The first major cause of this is the thinning of the ozone layer at the poles, which causes the passage of harmful UV rays into the atmosphere, thereby increasing the polar thaw. Other factors undoubtedly contribute as well, such as air pollution (produced by domestic, industrial, and transport combustion gases), water pollution (produced by the spillage of toxic materials and liquids into water basins), and soil pollution (produced by pesticides, herbicides, and domestic and industrial waste). It is the quantity and the quality of the pollution mix of our times that represent a significant step backward, compared to the situation in previous centuries. The earth system is resilient and capable of absorbing and degrading waste, but only within certain limits. In these three cases, pollution produces imbalances both in the carbon cycle and in the water cycle, which, in turn, interfere with the mechanisms of "defense" from the sun's rays and from the earth's "heat mining." With this unexpected increase in heat (caused not by the position of the earth in relation to the sun, but by anthropic factors), the consequences can be highly problematic, such as, for example, the average rise in the level of the oceans.

Also, we are witnessing a high rate of deforestation (with consequent soil erosion), which drastically decreases the carbon absorption capacity in the form of CO_2, leading to an increase in the greenhouse effect. Trees are fundamental not only for the carbon cycle but also for maintaining air humidity, generating clouds that protect from the sun and produce rain.

In addition to destroying biodiversity, deforestation undermines the stability and the organic richness of soils. There are generally two reasons for deforestation: agricultural and residential. In the first case, the problem arises when expanses of forest are put to intensive monocultures. We are witnessing the rapid exhaustion of natural resources and soil erosion to the

point of desertification.[7] But there is also a social cost. In Africa, Asia, and South America, massive deforestation repeatedly affects small local communities and subsistence farmers who, when dispossessed, are relocated elsewhere, generally in relatively infertile areas. Those displaced are therefore forced to adapt to soils with which they are not familiar and which they cultivate with unsustainable agricultural methods (doing more harm than good), often depending exclusively on high yield seeds and expensive technological products that drain virgin areas. Unfortunately, the dispossessed farmers are not always given other possibilities, since the only options are subsidies or expedients.[8]

Finally, with pollution and deforestation, the extinction of species has intensified. This is by no means of minor importance, since many species that live in symbiosis with their habitat contribute directly to balance the dense biotic network by their presence.

III. *Technological Development and Commodification of Nature*

Two other factors significantly impact the environment: technological development and the commodification of nature. Technology is not in itself a threat to environmental health, but it is the underlying concept of both nature and environment that can make it threatening.

Neither the increasingly advanced technological applications typical of societies transitioning first to agriculture and then to industry nor the constant search for new territories to colonize that is typical of modern capitalism have been anthropologically or environmentally painless.

The conceptual bases are to be found in a progressive detachment from a divine cosmology, which more or less kept together *ontos* (being) and *telos* (goal), heaven and earth, scientific investigation and religious morality, in a frame of reference that appeared relatively organic and interconnected. From William of Ockham onwards, the world of rationality and divine purpose started to fall apart. The impossibility of really knowing the rationality and will of God in the realm of nature led to the deprivation of the world of evident rationality and order. *Telos* (goal) and *ethos* (character or nature) are

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[7] See J. Donald Hughes, *Ecology of Ancient Civilizations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975); and Clive Ponting, *The Green History of the World* (London: Penguin, 1988).

[8] See Richard North, *Life on a Modern Planet: A Manifesto for Progress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 48; Paul Harrison, *The Third World Tomorrow: A Report from the Battle Front in the War Against Poverty* (London: Penguin, 1981), 4546, referred to in Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16.

no longer self-evident in the natural world, which may now be rediscovered with new paradigms. With the definition of the fundamental laws of physics, Isaac Newton laid the foundation of a mechanical cosmology. Immanuel Kant, for his part, concluded that from the physical world and its internal laws it is not possible to derive the *telos* of a good God, which would have made it possible to elaborate a moral law for civil life. If God is not comprehensible through a "natural" way, but only through an act of faith in his existence, then faith and morals are divorced from science and reason and remain confined to the private sphere. The order in nature is no longer tied to God, and there is in nature no longer evidence of a divine end to which it aims. Nature, on the other hand, is incomplete and can be remodeled. Kant and Newton thus created the presuppositions for an atheistic cosmology that removes God from the cosmos and places its purpose in individual human perceptions: the world is ready to be transformed and directed by human action.[9]

Moving on from medieval thought, every form of relationship between the parts of nature (or even just the notion) is reset. If in the Middle Ages the deep interconnections were wrongly conceived of, now they are completely rejected according to rationalistic reductionism and atomistic thought.[10] This pattern is clear in Cartesian thought, where reason (*res cogitans*) becomes a major discriminating element in human understanding and corporeality is reduced to a pure extension of it (*res extensa*). Disenchantment and demystification of creation follow, the typical product being the anthropocentric Enlightenment. The environment is perceived as pure and simple matter, tangible, and recombinable. The objective is simple: to dominate nature with increasingly refined technological tools, *de facto* elevating scientific thought to a secular paradigm of salvation.[11]

When nature is demystified, it also becomes subject to commodification and appropriation. In premodern Europe, nature was God's property, and therefore earth and work were conceived within a clear directional divine order. However, when a monetary economy becomes dominant, the forms of exchange and economic relations rooted in the previous order are reformulated. Money allows spatially distanced and temporally deferred transactions to be carried out and shifts the centers of power from those

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[9] John H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 204–6, referred to in Northcott, *Environment*, 59.

[10] See Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

[11] See also Alessandro Piccirillo, "Animalia: La questione animale tra etica delle prospettive e antropocentrismo relazionale," *Studi di Teologia: Supplemento* 11(2013): 7.

who have land and take care of it to those who have currency and assets: corporations, banks, and institutional investors. The new mobility and the concentration of social power in monetary wealth contributes to the breaking up of traditional authorities and the mechanisms of shared exercise of power in local communities. Distancing and abstraction from human relations become the dominant form of economic relationships. These relationships are separated from divine restraints, from the traditional moral obligations of good neighbor relations, from justice, and from care for other people and creation, and they alienate people from the natural world.[12] Money becomes the parameter for measuring value, and well-being is measured in terms of the monetary economy and not in broader terms. Profit becomes the real driving force of technological development and investment policies. So when nature is demystified and commodified, then the kind of productive policy adopted will not have much interest in preserving that asset, but will have interest in exploiting it.

In a biblical vision of the world it is difficult to imagine care of creation under these conditions. It follows that care of creation and ecological commitment are put into practice not simply through individual behavior on single issues (an atomistic approach), but in global and realistic terms. If we do not understand the underlying structures and the dynamics involved, we may be well intentioned, but we will not be effective. But what are the existing paradigms?

IV. *Environmental Ethics*

The ethics presented here are based on a selection of modern moral paradigms: consequentialism, deontology, and ecocentrism.[13] We will present them in a summarized form, and one should also understand them as overlapping at times.

1. *Consequentialism*

A place of pre-eminence in consequentialism is occupied by Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism.[14] Like any good utilitarian, Singer aims at promoting pleasure and reducing suffering, and not so much at defining rights *per se*, as they are not always helpful in attaining the maximum good. A

[12] Northcott, *Environment*, 78–79.

[13] For a helpful summary of these traditions, see ibid., 90–115. For other ethical paradigms not dealt with here (ecofeminism, religious anthropocentrism, and religious theocentrism), see ibid., 116–63.

[14] Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (London: Cape, 1990).

right could prevent the achievement of the maximum good, proving to be legal but unfair. The promotion of good is extended to all beings who have interests (e.g., in not suffering and in surviving), who are conscious of themselves as distinct entities, and who are able to prefer one option to another. If a being (animal or human) suffers, such suffering must be considered together with the suffering of others. If the sum of all the reasons for not suffering implies that the actions chosen to obtain the least possible suffering for the whole include a certain amount of suffering for some, then those actions are justifiable. Singer's consequentialist functionalism undoubtedly exposes him to the criticism of reductionism, because it results in a sterile economic cost-benefit (pleasure-suffering) calculation, and because the notion of good cannot be exhaustively explained by the pleasure-suffering dynamic (which is essentially subjective). This kind of consequentialism is hardly operative, given that the calculation of the best choice between good and evil is in fact a logical fiction because of self-evident space-time limitations and its lack of predictive force. Another considerable critical aspect of Singer's utilitarianism is that its true area of application is the animal world, while it is virtually oblivious to the moral interests of nonsentient beings and the more extended community of life, thereby showing a seriously limited scope for environmental ethics.[15]

2. *Deontology*

Deontological approaches attribute *a priori* inherent values to subjects. Based on these *a priori* values, Tom Regan postulates the existence of natural rights for animals.[16] The first foundation for these rights lies in the concept of "value-in-itself." This value is an individual objective element for every living being that entitles a living being to rights by granting it dignity and respect. Regan links "value-in-itself" to being sentient and (self) conscious. This requirement is possessed by all moral agents (adult humans, rational, responsible, and self-conscious) and by all moral patients (conscious and sentient individuals, responsible or not, rational or not). This guarantees the attribution of positive, direct, inviolable, and extended rights to both human and nonhuman animals, typically sensate mammals. These rights are life, freedom, and well-being. One marked difficulty of this approach is accounting properly for one of its strongest assumptions, the value-in-itself, which is taken as self-evident. The entire structure may be dangerously

[15] See Piccirillo, "Animalia," 12–13.

[16] Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (London: Routledge, 1988). A similar Christian approach can be found in Linzey's "theos-rights." Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SCM, 1987); Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM, 1994).

flawed by a form of naturalistic fallacy in attributing respect to an individual only because there is a state of consciousness. Furthermore, the categories of moral patients and moral agents have fairly clear boundaries, but the reason and place of such boundaries can be arbitrary. This implies a reduced extension of rights to a few protected subjects and does not look at the protection of entire ecosystems.

Holmes Rolston's deontological approach acknowledges an intrinsic value to both individuals and collectivities that is based on a purpose not dependent on human perception.[17] Rolston speaks of "objects-with-will," referring to all the living beings with objective and autonomous character. Rolston therefore defends the complete otherness of natural objects and their claims to the right to flourish, and he also includes communities and ecosystems. Having said that, Rolston builds a hierarchy of values between different life forms with "richer" features so that they are able to make real choices. Although this deontological approach is by far the most operative, it still does not address the systemic issues and the forms of alienation from nature of modern civilizations.

3. *Ecocentrism*

The ecocentric paradigms of Aldo Leopold and Baird Callicott seek to address both the purely ecological dynamics and the state of alienation previously mentioned.[18] They do so by looking at the earth as an integrated whole. At the same time, they attribute a moral significance to ecosystems defined as a community of interdependent lives (human and nonhuman). In particular, the land ethics of Leopold emphasizes the community of all life forms, forcing individuals to preserve biotic equilibria and restore their integrity when they are undermined. A biotic unit can contain predators, and this place must be preserved to ensure the integrity of the ecosystem. Humanity is obliged to limit overpopulation of animal or plant species and preserve those balances. According to Callicott, this means that a certain degree of suffering must be factored in, contrary to the utilitarians and proponents of animal rights. At the same time, humans are called to moderate their lifestyle so as not to threaten the rest of the biotic community.

This form of ecocentrism sees the ethics of the integrity of the earth primarily as a guarantee of the stability of the ecosystem, which includes

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[17] Holmes Rolston, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

[18] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); J. Baird Callicott, *In Defence of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

human society. This perspective contrasts with a biblical vision, which claims that when human and social life is in line with the Mosaic law and the ethics of Jesus, then both earth and ecosystems prosper. Usually social injustice precedes ecological disaster. A sound earth ethic must be able to manage this structural datum to be effective and to be applied universally instead of being valid only in national parks and wildlife reserves.

The Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock is based on a biochemical model that sees the world as a living entity. This entity sustains itself and has its own intelligence that makes the biosphere livable.[19] Gaia is the product of thought that combines reductionist elements (scientific knowledge) and holistic elements. According to this, the more humans exercise their influence, the more they take responsibility, so the moderation of their impact is a key element. If humans put Gaia's life at risk, she will find a way to readjust, even eliminating humanity if necessary. To avoid reaching this point, urbanized humans and scientists in particular must recover their being in connection with the natural world. Lovelock's hypothesis includes a notion of planetary egalitarian democracy, where humanity is a partner of planetary forces rather than an owner or a steward.

Another model of ecocentrism is *deep ecology*, represented by Freya Matthews and Matthew Fox.[20] In this paradigm, the real differences between human and nonhuman are eliminated, thus producing a universal mystical unity. This approach suffers from a form of pantheistic monism[21] and risks promoting a homogenization of nature for purely human purposes that instead of protecting it puts it at risk. If we imagine a unified and nondiversified world, we will be prone to resetting it in a human image.

Arne Naess's ecosophy is very similar to land ethics and the Gaia hypothesis.[22] If the problem of Western humans with nature is their atomistic conception of self and preoccupation with their own interests, Naess says, they must rethink their self-interest starting from ecology. In doing so, individuals and societies will pursue the positive qualities of personal commitment and responsibility, combined with mutual dependence, in a form of relational self-realization. The subjectivism of this position does not consider the real differences between human and nonhuman beings and

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[19] James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[20] Freya Matthews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991); Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1983).

[21] David T. Williams, "Trinitarian Ecology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 18.2 (2000): 151–52.

[22] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 153 and ch. 2.

ends up incorporating the other into one's self for self-realization. Even so, we are faced with a process of homogenization of differences and relationality that becomes a rhetorical device.

Adapting the interpretative framework of multiperspectivalism (norm, existence, and situation, see below)[23] to the paradigms briefly presented, we may note that deontological ethics are highly normative, while the utilitarian, ecophilosophical and deep ecology models have strongly subjective-experiential traits. Looking further into the Gaia hypothesis, we note that the model has normative and subjective elements. Leopold and Callicott's ecocentrism, with their emphasis on the ethics of the integrity of the earth and their investment in relational structures, has a more normative-situational approach.

V. *Relational Anthropocentrism*

The ethics we have seen thus far encourage us to find an overall paradigm that can hold together at the same time the issues of safeguarding the environment and the framework of the human-nature relationship, consisting of power dynamics, justice, and social ties. Such a platform would make it possible to build an ethic that is based on the doctrine of creation in relation to the Trinity (norm), on the profound essence of the *imago Dei* and participation in the community of creation (existence), and, finally, on the dynamic reality of conservation and service (situation). We call this paradigm *relational anthropocentrism*.[24]

1. *Creation*

Creation does not belong to man; it is not his. It is created by God for his own pleasure and delight. It is God's property, and he claims sovereign jurisdiction over it. Creation is not sustained by human beings. The laws that keep the planet running, the food that animals consume, the life lived

[23] See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008). In Italian Reformed evangelicalism, the multiperspectival approach in ethics has been consistently applied in Leonardo De Chirico, "La pratica dell'uno del molteplice: Etica delle prospettive," *Studi di Teologia: Supplemento* 34 (2005): 156–65; CSEB, "Aborto: Un documento del Centro Studi di Etica e Bioetica di Padova," *Studi di Teologia: Supplemento* 6 (2005): 3–15; Leonardo De Chirico, "Eutanasia: Un documento del Centro Studi di Etica e Bioetica di Padova," *Studi di Teologia: Supplemento* 1 (2005): 2–12; Alessandro Piccirillo, "L'antropologia del 'seno materno' nel personalismo relazionale di Leonardo De Chirico: Per una ridefinizione dello statuto dell'embrione," *Bioetica: Rivista Interdisciplinare* 19.1 (2011): 75–96.

[24] For a good summary of these perspectives, see John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990), 50–54.

by the created beings; all depend on God's providential support. God, after the creation, is active in the care, management, maintenance, and nourishment of every living species (animal or plant). This providence is significant because it reflects the value that God sets on his creation. In dealing with ecosystems that are not in direct contact with man and that do not depend on the presence of humans but exist independently, God emphasizes his centrality in creation so that much flora and fauna exist regardless of whether they are useful to man. Thus, creation does not reflect us but the Creator, and God is a God of order. The account of creation in Genesis 1 is indicative of the fact that the world was made ex nihilo, but it was made with an order that permeates the profound structure of creation. Chaos and chance are excluded. In separating the waters from the dry earth, God places order and limits on the uncontrolled and destructive power of oceans and seas (cf. Jer 5:22). In separating day and night with the positive interference of stars and planets, God regulates time, declaring "let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years" (Gen 1:14).

The God of the Bible is also the God of covenants and alliances. In establishing order in the creation, God makes an asymmetrical covenant in which the minor contractor (the created world) will be kept in order and the laws that govern it will not be suspended. That he has established a covenant with the day and the night and the laws of heaven and earth implies that there is a form of stable and primordial covenant with the creation. This creation also includes human society, with which God has made several covenants throughout history. Further, there is an extremely close connection between the covenant with creation and those made more specifically with human societies, as Jeremiah 33:20–21 makes quite clear. This passage refers to the cosmic aspect in the Davidic covenant and the natural order that recalls the social order, as both natural and social order represent the Creator. The prosperity of the social order is founded on the keeping of the cosmic covenant; the prosperity of the natural order is marked by man's respect of the covenants between God and human society.[25] Isaiah 24:4–6 and Jeremiah 5:23–25 indicate the consequences of breaking the covenants between God and man. The covenantal harmony underlies the created order and is the basis of the ecological stability of the earth.

In the covenants and the stipulations between God and humanity, there is also an appeal to justice that is not exclusively moralistic; rather, it is an integral call to unite justice and adoration. Adoration is to be addressed to God alone, and not to the natural created elements, and it is because of this

[25] See also Psalm 72:1–6.

adoration that social ethics and harmony with the environment flourish. The prophets of Israel repeatedly underline the direct relationship between religious infidelity and social collapse, combined with a subsequent subversion of the natural order.[26]

Conceiving creation in these terms helps to orient and hold together ecological sensitivity and the dynamics of political and social power. The regulatory framework of reference is effectively the covenant made by God with his creation, which is closely connected with the other covenants made with humanity as a specific part of creation. Another highly qualifying aspect of this bond is the institution of the Sabbath of the earth[27] and the Jubilee. Rest for the earth is not merely an exercise of precaution and faith but also a real form of respect and ecological safeguard for the natural order. The exploitation of the earth is controlled, and the regenerative capacities of the ecosystem are allowed to act. The redistribution of the land among tribes was a reference to God as the sole landowner and Israel as delegated owner. It allowed for the exercise of justice and social mercy to safeguard the members of society from constant exposure to vulnerability. Moreover, if the earth is not owned by individuals for an indefinite period but belongs to God and is entrusted to people in wider social contexts (the tribe and redistribution of land at the Jubilee), it implies that the earth represents a common intergenerational heritage. An approach to land management and ownership completely different from the current economic order emerges.

2. *Imago Dei*

If God is Triune, and if his people are equal in essence (sharing a common creatureliness) but distinct in function, this Trinitarian structure of multiplicity and unity is also reflected in the creation in the way God intended. Descriptions of what it means to be in the image of God must take into account the Tri-unity.

One of the first dimensions to be grasped is the incarnation. When the second person of the Godhead becomes body and matter within his own creation, then it becomes even clearer that redemption is not *from* corrupt matter (but from sin) because it is *in* matter that the second person of the Trinity is incarnate. Redemption does not come by eliminating matter, but by redirecting it to a creational trajectory oriented to God's purposes. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand that the Trinity itself implies a

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[26] See Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992).

[27] Northcott, *Environment*, 187–93.

positive conception of the created world, not only because it was declared good at creation, but because it is declared good in the redemptive incarnation and in view of God's eternal purposes. A clear understanding of this dimension of the Trinity in creation allows human beings to recover a relational ethic between human and nonhuman. Moreover, if creation also explicates the Triune Creator, it will also express the deep and stable interconnections between the three persons of God, through the harmonious interdependence of its parts. The eschatological perspective aims at this restoration.[28]

Francis Schaeffer, in his 1977 work *Pollution and the Death of Man*, refers to these aspects when he says,

> It follows that if we return to the Reformation's Biblical view that nature is worth painting, so the nature which we paint is also worth something in itself. This is the true Christian mentality. It rests upon the reality of creation out of nothing by God. But it also follows that all things are equally created by God. All things were equally created out of nothing. *All things, including man, are equal in their origin*, as far as creation is concerned.[29]

Then, describing the relationship between an infinite God and his finite creation, he says,

> On the side of God's infinity everything else is finite and equally separated from God; but on the side of his personality, God has created man in His own image. Therefore, man's relationship is upward [as being in the image God] rather than downward [as being part of the natural creation]. … Man is separated, as personal, from nature because he is made in the image of God, that is he has personality, and as such he is unique in the creation; but he is united to all other creatures as being *created*. Man is separated from everything else, but that does not mean that there is not also a proper relationship downward on the side of man's being created and finite. … Christians reject the view that there is no distinction—or only a quantitative distinction—between man and other things; *and* they reject the view that man is totally separated from all other things.[30]

Humanity is not given a choice between *upward* and *downward*; it must relate to these dimensions in an integral way, in different yet interconnected relationships.[31] There is no room for dualism that attributes more value to the dimension of the spirit than to matter. In other words, these divisions

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[28] See Romans 8:19–23.

[29] Francis Schaeffer and Udo W. Middelmann, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 47.

[30] Ibid., 48–50.

[31] Ibid., 52.

are overcome in the biblical worldview, because it is integral and integrated. As the Creator values the created world (in creation, the incarnation, and redemption), and takes charge of it, so must humanity reattribute this value and live it out in concrete ways.

So, the *imago Dei* as a subjective or experiential element facilitates the adoption of an anthropocentrism before and under the Creator. It is in itself a by-product of theocentrism. Man will take on his covenantal responsibilities, valuing his creatureliness as God values it. A relational anthropocentrism challenges the biocentric objection that views the *imago Dei* as an imperialist pretext. It does so because, while it does not eliminate the distinction, it can appreciate its own creatureliness by learning how to relate effectively with other creatures.

3. *Conservation and Service*

Humanity is placed within the natural order and has the function of dominating it (*radah*, Gen 1:26) and subduing it (*kabash*, Gen 1:28). This is strong language, but it must be contextualized to avoid poor misinterpretations. If the sovereign Creator values his work by repeatedly saying "It is good," then when he orders humanity to dominate and subdue, he adopts the royal language of a lord addressing one of his representatives, charging him to go to every corner of his kingdom to assess its progress, report it, and actively contribute to its conservation, management, and restoration. In performing this function, humanity is called on to support techno-scientific enterprise (naming animals, doing taxonomy, producing scientific knowledge), to innovate (developing new techniques and new skills), and to manage ("and subdue it"). If the words *radah* and *kabash* continue to sound strong, this is balanced by the seemingly incongruous order of Genesis 2:15, to work and care for the earth. More specifically, the wide meaning of the terms covers the sense of serving, working for someone (*'abad*) and taking care of and safeguarding (*shamar*). *'Abad* and *shamar* indicate an action done in the name of and in favor of creation and not on behalf of human beings as such. Responsibility for control passes through service and attention to and caring for the suffering, the damage, and the delicate balance of creation on God's behalf. A good way to safeguard is to strive as much as possible to favor a harmonious shalom for the ecosystem through both sustainable development models and productive policies, urbanization, and landscape management.

Returning to the commands concerning domination and service, we can use the apparent oxymoron *servant dominion*. This understanding is useful for an environmental ethic because it contains a balance between the

dimension of responsibility and that of care and conservation. This allows us to have the best tools to face the different circumstances in which we operate, getting as close as possible to God and Christ. It is, in fact, in the incarnation of Christ and redemption that we see this tension resolved. Thus, Christ's incarnation asserts the value of creatureliness, and redemption qualifies this value by pointing to the end of creation. At the same time, Christ embodies the servant king who controls reality while also serving to the point of sacrifice. Now, *mutatis mutandis*, the dominion that humans can implement is that of knowing and valuing reality and making responsible decisions about the management of creation.

In this sense, we have often talked about environmental *stewardship*, administration, and custodianship. Over the years, this definition has required further specification in light of problems arising with the interpretation of this concept. Stewardship, in particular, implies a condition in which humans are practically in control of nature when in reality they are not. Criticism has also been made that this concept leads to an attitude that is too top-down and not very participatory, as in the case of those who manage the assets of others with a certain detachment. In other words, if you are not the owner, then there is little incentive in showing real interest and being responsibly involved. We are seeing more and more that the tables are being turned: individual ownership of land is often connected with a purely commodified view of the earth, and this has repeatedly led to the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves in the present.

Having said that, the problem of participation remains, and the value of stewardship cannot be completely overlooked. At this point, it is worth reinforcing this concept, with the awareness that men and women are members of the biotic community, members of the community of creation, or co-creatures.[32] If we link this concept to that of the covenant mentioned earlier, we see how in the biblical framework humanity, which is represented by the people of God, and the natural order, which is represented by the earth (promise), are both parties in the cosmic covenant that God established with Israel at the time of Moses, but which still has its full paradigmatic value even now.

Returning to servant dominion, which is carried out by co-creatures as part of a cosmic covenant, service completes (and is completed by) domination, because it entails taking responsibility for the needs of creation and caring for it without a "superiority complex" in relation to the elements of

[32] See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), chapter 3.

nature. Dominion and service therefore concretely dissolve the claims of mindless exploitation of creation, and together they assume the responsibility of coming into contact with other creatures without awe but with humility.

Conclusion

It is clear that creation care, once the many dimensions involved are understood, is realized through very different projects, since much work is to be done. A known risk one should be aware of is that, due to a lack of coordination, many human-resource-draining projects will be activated. It therefore becomes crucial to know the context in which one intends to operate and to work with a clear understanding of the past. Once we recognize that commitment to creation care is a call addressed to all humanity, not just parts of it, we must assess how effective pioneering or reinforcement actions are possible at a collective level.

Often the actors giving the initial impulse are the intermediate bodies. A flexible and dynamic organization will make building around a core of strong ideas possible, but without institutional and bureaucratic rigidity. It is through actions of associations, committees, and lobbies that institutions are called on to implement regulatory measures to achieve ecological objectives. When this happens, new spaces open up for further interventions and further demands on politics, education, and culture.

As we have seen, for an environmental ethic in the care of creation, it is necessary not only to verify how a paradigm responds systemically to ecological urgencies, but also to assess what degree of planning and management can have an effective long-term influence in moral and political choices. Careful observation will recognize how environmental issues necessarily have direct relationships with the dynamics of social, economic, and political justice, and with a plurality of world views.