

Catholic Teaching on Creation and Environment. The Challenges of Human Intervention in the Natural Order

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a) Human intervention and the natural order: a relationship in crisis

The complexity of the relationship between human intervention and the natural order raises the question of the distinction between technological feasibility and ethical constraint: the myth of the neutrality of science, which is based on the abolition of this basic distinction, has proved to be destructive and alienating precisely in its ethical, social and ecological repercussions. The ‘ecological crisis’ – which today is so widely debated – is fundamentally the indiscriminate imbalance of natural rhythms brought about by accelerated human change. We could say that the core of the environmental crisis lies in the difference between ‘historical time’ and ‘biological time’, that is, the lag between the fast time of technology and the slow time of biology. “Change which once occurred over millions of years can now take place (due to this imbalance) in a few decades only, and the consequences for human and social equilibrium correspond to an acceleration of millions of years of history ... *biological time and historical time follow different rhythms*”.¹ The consequences of this time lag – of which perhaps the most dramatic example is the potential destructive use of nuclear energy – have devastating effects not only in terms of environmental damage, but in human terms as well.

This reading of the ‘ecological crisis’ also gives us insight into its modern nature. In reality, our ‘unbalanced’ approach to nature has always existed: what is new and modern is its planetary dimension due to technological progress and the acceleration of change. The last two centuries have witnessed an unparalleled escalation of the human means to change reality: an attitude characterised by the presumption of the human being to exercise absolute domination over the natural order has emerged. Knowledge is understood as possession of what is known, and scientific research and technology as expressions of the ‘will to power’ of absolute reason. Human beings, “*maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*” (Descartes), are thus the exclusive arbiters of the destiny of the world. The *sapere aude* of the Enlightenment merges with Bacon’s ‘knowledge is power’, which is at the origin of the modern development of science and technology. The conquest of nature becomes the fundamental task of the new order of knowledge: really knowing it means dominating the world. The triumph of instrumental reason is at hand!

The speculative form in which the concept of knowledge as domination takes shape and prevails is the idealistic equation between the ideal and the real, which fully expresses the presumption of totality on the part of ‘adult’ reason, its intolerance of any extrinsic limitation. There emerges the total triumph of the idea: it is not thought that needs to conform to reality, but rather reality to thought. The violence inflicted on reality in order to assimilate it to conceptual representation is perceived as a sort of affirmation of the truth, a superimposition of the ‘*ordre de la raison*’ on the irrational disorder of historical time. Ideological reasoning is totalising: this is precisely why it becomes rationality, directing all things to its self-affirmation, to the primacy of its representation of the world, and thus to its exclusive self-interest. The concept of time itself is shaped by this modern development: in its pursuit of

¹ Cf. E. Tizzi, *Tempi storici, tempi biologici*, Milan 1984, 62. (Translated in English as *The End of Time*).

total domination, reason imposes a relentless acceleration on the historical processes of the alignment of reality to the ideal.

This ‘haste’ of reason is expressed both in the escalating pace of technological and scientific progress and in the urgency and revolutionary passion of ideology. The ‘myth of progress’ is simply another form of the will to power of reason: the inherent presumption of an ultimate conciliation, which overcomes the painful division of reality and the ideal, becomes the interpretative key to understanding historical processes, the guiding inspiration for the transformation of the present. The modern ‘philosophies of history’ do not limit themselves to interpreting the world, but seek to transform it into their own image and likeness. The notion of emancipation – the engaging leitmotif of the modern spirit – has an undeniable force of urgency, an acceleration on time that cannot be delayed: the divergence between ‘historical time’ and ‘biological time’ is taken to the limit by the urge for total fulfilment so typical of the ideologies of progress.

b) The presumed responsibilities of the biblical vision of the world

The theological roots of the modern unbalanced relationship between humanity and nature have been invoked in order to demonstrate the serious responsibilities of the Jewish–Christian tradition in the ecological crisis, to the extent of condemning the “disastrous consequences of Christianity” (C. Amery) or even of imputing the “destruction of the earth and humanity” to its legacy (E. Drewermann).² The root of this abuse is seen to be the divine instruction from the book of Genesis: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1:28). This biblical affirmation – invested with the authority of revelation – is seen to have determined the development of an ethics of domination that is so intensely anthropocentric as to have justified the purpose of the world and its exploitation merely in terms of human interest. The subjugation of nature is thus given absolute moral justification. All is permissible for human beings, the images of God and lords of creation, in their relationship with other creatures: “If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt”.³

This theory is very simplistic, for the original meaning of this biblical text must be understood in the light of the other and earlier creation narrative, where the “Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). What is required of man in this text is anything but subjugation, and rather we denote the characteristics of attention, stewardship and care. Moreover, history gives us very fine examples in the Jewish–Christian tradition of non–exploitative and indeed loving relationships towards nature, which cannot be understood if the meaning of Genesis 1:28 were univocally negative. One need only think of Judaism’s veneration of nature as bearing the imprint of the Creator (calling to mind the Lord’s satisfaction in contemplating His work, for example in Genesis 1:31, or the ‘silent words of the sky’ that speak of God’s glory in Psalm 19, or the day of rest that all creation is called to on the Sabbath). There are also individuals belonging to the Christian tradition, such as Saint Benedict and his understanding of the profound relationship between prayer and work, and Saint Francis with his *Canticle of the Creatures*. “The beauty of creation – affirms for example the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man’s intellect and will”.⁴

² Cf. Lynn White Jr, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, in *Science* 155 (1967) 1203–1207. The argument for the historical responsibility of Christianity in the ecological crisis is taken up and developed, for example, by C. Amery, *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentum*, Hamburg 1972; E. Drewermann, *Der tödliche Fortschritt. Von der Zerstörung der Erde und des Menschen im erbe des Christentums*, Regensburg 1980.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), n.341.

A second criticism of the Jewish–Christian tradition is that of having brought about the primary ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Max Weber), leading to the loss of sacredness towards nature: by emphasising God’s divinity and His sovereign transcendence, biblical thought is held to be responsible for the most radical form of secularisation, which in depriving the universe of its ‘numinous presences’ has reduced it to a mere land of conquest abandoned to human greed. Jewish–Christian monotheism is accused of having privileged human interest over nature, acting as a theological guarantor of the extreme anthropocentrism of the biblical conception. The lure of this theory should not mislead us: it is entirely questionable whether nature left to the mercy of alleged and capricious deities would really have been more respected. Rather, we need to ask whether it would not be true to say that it is the very relationship of the human being and nature to their one Lord that has imbued a highly developed ecological responsibility into human consciousness. Furthermore, if the ‘disenchantment of the world’ had really had such devastating effects, responsibility must be borne by the ideals of human freedom and experience that ensue from this disenchantment and that would be inalienable even in an era of ecological crisis.

Lastly, the Jewish–Christian tradition is held responsible for the emergence of the linear concept of time that is at the heart of the modern myth of progress and the cause of so much violence towards the natural world, which has been forcibly subdued into its idealised representation. The biblical vision of the exodus and the kingdom, the religion of promise and the ethics of hope, are considered to be guilty of projecting humanity into the future, imposing a frenetic acceleration into human consciousness and sense of historical time. In reality, the relationship between the myth of progress and the religion of the exodus and the kingdom is strongly dialectical. If the derivation of the modern philosophy of history from Jewish–Christian theology is undoubted, then one must recognise that it is the very rejection of the theological root that leaves room for the dead–ends of modern ideology. When the sense of transcendence is lost, alterity is emptied of substance; the imperialism of the historical subject has free reign, vis–a–vis the natural world as well (one needs only to call to mind the barbarity of ideological totalitarianisms, left and right, from national socialism to many forms of real socialism). It is therefore not the theological root of the modern myth of progress, but rather its loss, which transforms that myth into an enduring threat to the balance between humans and their environment.⁵

These reflections on the theological responsibilities in the ecological crisis therefore disclose a dialectical intermingling of parts: the real question is what type of ethical approach – indeed authentically biblical attitude – needs to be developed that would promote a responsible relationship among humans themselves, and with their environment.

c) Towards a basic heteronomy

The Jewish–Christian tradition draws together humanity and the cosmos within a unique design of alliance: while receiving a particular dignity and responsibility, humanity stands before God in solidarity with all of creation, and is called to fulfil the spirit of the alliance in its relationship with the Creator, with other humans and with the entire universe. Thus, nature has nothing of the divine: it is a creature, just as humans are. Nonetheless, insofar as it is an object of the creative love of the God of the alliance, nature has its own immense dignity, which resonates in God’s satisfaction at the end of six days: “God saw that it was good” (Gen 1). The ‘disenchantment of the world’ attributed to biblical revelation is thus not a question of the exclusive relationship of humans and nature, understood in terms of exploitation and domination, but of the multifaceted relationship between the created universe, the highest of creatures, and the one Creator and Lord of heaven and earth. On the ethical level, this

⁵ Cf. K. Löwith, *Meaning in History The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1949.

relationship demands human accountability to the living God, on the one hand with regard to our relationship with nature, which God has entrusted to our care, and on the other with regard to our relationship with other humans, who are similarly images of God.

Whereas the Greek dualism of the one and the many sees the exteriority of the creature with respect to the Creator, biblical faith sees the interiority of the world, its place in the eternal dynamism of divine life, with which it is nonetheless never confused. The narrative of the six days of creation in the book of Genesis shows God's loving sovereignty over all of creation. The Christian vision sees the world as "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), and yet also as being infinitely transcended by the mystery of God. Creation in biblical faith is understood at the same time as both concealment and manifestation of divine oversight, insofar as it is the expression of the free and gratuitous communication of God, who has chosen 'to have time' for humanity, creating the universe and history with which He engages freely for the sake of love.

In this light, one understands how biblical anthropocentrism is actually 'relational': the human being's role in creation is not that of a despot, but of custodian and friend, and thus human interaction with the world cannot be understood in terms of domination, but of communion. Being the image of the living God, the human person is made for love: having received the gift of life and self, human beings can only be authentically fulfilled to the degree that they are able to establish loving relationships with other humans and other forms of created life, each relationship naturally bearing its individual traits and exchange of gifts. In this perspective, no human intervention on the natural order is acceptable if it in any form violates the sacrality of human life and the uniqueness and incomparable dignity of every individual human being (such as destructive genetic engineering practices). In contrast, whenever this is respected and promoted (for example, in diagnostic or therapeutic genetic engineering procedures, on the condition that these techniques do not compromise the integrity or the very life of the human being), human intervention in the natural order can be morally acceptable.

The fundamental criterion in making an ethical decision is therefore the openness to the sovereignty of God, the mystery of the world. Whenever we encounter the absolute autonomy of historical protagonism, we also encounter all possible kinds of manipulation and alienation. In contrast, whenever a basic heteronomy is recognised and accepted, even the most advanced scientific research will respect the centrality and absolute value of the human being and will promote a culture of life and quality of life for each and for all. For a scientist, embracing this basic heteronomy means abandoning the idea of setting oneself up as the measure of everything and everyone, and entering into the logic of the ethic of solidarity and responsibility, which alone will serve the whole person in each person. The battle taking place on the frontiers of the question of the morality of human intervention in the natural order is one not merely between man and himself, but a struggle like Jacob's, where at stake is the very dignity of the human being and the quality of life of all. This is a struggle that will be won by those who allow themselves to be conquered: it is only when the existence of a human being is recognised as a gift to be welcomed and respected, as inviolable in its sacrality, as founded on divine transcendence, that scientific research will set itself limits and deontological standards, and thus escape the effects of alienation.

The ethical dimension of human intervention in the natural order does not lie in the power of science and its claim to absoluteness, but in an awareness of its risks, its limitations and its potential, in such a way that it forms an ordered part of human solidarity and moral responsibility towards every single human being. The God of the Jewish-Christian faith is not our competitor, but rather our ultimate guarantor and saviour: even in the field of human intervention in the natural order.