
SEARCHING FOR THE FOUNDATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL RENEWAL A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Ecological renewal is a subject of intense academic and popular debates. It is the Christian attitude towards the natural environment that can elicit radical comments. In this article we attempt to clarify the Christian attitude (Catholic, in particular) towards ecological issues based on contemporary documents of the Church and the teaching of the popes. The current ecological crisis obliges Christians to seek solutions that respond to several threats. According to the Christian teaching, humanity's stewardship implies that we all look after the Earth. In order to achieve this, pro-ecological 'metanoia' of the human person, initiated by education and ecological movements, is necessary.

Keywords: philosophical, anthropology, crisis, renewal, common good

1. Introduction

The term 'ecological renewal' is not clearly defined as it appears in the academic literature in various contexts and with a variety of meanings. One may come across this term in texts of a most miscellaneous character: philosophical, theological, sociological, pedagogical as well as political. For that reason, it is difficult to define it precisely. Ecology has been the subject of academic reflection for decades. However, this reflection has become more radical in recent years. In Polish texts, for the most part, the issues of Ecology, ecological crisis and its risks go hand in hand. In media discussions especially, one may hear of a variety of Christian (and Catholic, in particular) attitudes towards the natural environment: from recognizing Christianity as a committed proponent of truly pro-ecological attitudes to perceiving it as the enemy of the holistic care of the Earth. Sometimes Christian organizations look at certain ecological initiatives apprehensively, as they associate them with radical left wing politics

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that perceives Christian premises as false [1]. On the other hand, numerous ecological movements sharply, though usually not substantively, criticize the Catholic Church for its alleged hostility towards Nature. The irony is that Christianity, for a long time accused of being hostile toward scientific progress, is nowadays held responsible for being conducive to civilization development and, as a result, the ecological crisis. One may even come across an opinion that had it not been for Christianity, humanity would have lived (and would still live) in communion with Nature. Those who hold this view accuse the Church of recognizing humans as the masters of the Earth who can subdue it freely without proper respect for the environment and care for environmental sustainability. In his famous article, published over half a century ago, in 'Science', L. White Jr. argued that Christian religion puts the human being in a particular position: thanks to the power received from God, the human being satisfies one's needs and exploits the Earth disregarding its good [2]. Carl Sagan blames Descartes and Francis Bacon for the ecological crisis - the two being under huge influence of Christian religion and strengthening the notion of "us against Nature" [3, 4].

When referring to these accusations we must admit that even though during twenty centuries certain Christians have indeed contributed to the destruction of Nature, one cannot find the source of that in Christian premises nor the Holy Scripture. On the contrary, environmental degradation is associated with distortion of the true meaning of Christian principles [5]. From a historical perspective one can see that since the Middle Ages (when Christianity indeed informed the lives and way of thinking of societies) the human being became aware of one's bonds with Nature and fostered them. The scholastic school of medieval philosophy did not give much thought to the human being's relations with nature, and yet Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, did recognize the value of material reality as a whole with the human being as a central character [6]. What is more, thinkers from the Christian East (close to ecological sensitivity) as well as those of Benedictine and Franciscan tradition followed suit. E.g. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite suggests that God, like the Sun, radiates with his goodness on everything that exists, from spiritual beings to matter itself. On the other hand, Nemesius of Emesa considered man to be 'a world in miniature' that bonds mortal beings with immortal ones, rational with non-rational [7]. Benedictine monks, whose monasteries spread through Western Europe, took care of animals and cultivated the land in a way later imitated by others, in accord with the Biblical recommendation to "subdue the Earth". Respect towards every part of Nature and care to maintain 'equilibrium' in Nature were significant aspects of their activities [8].

Saint Francis of Assisi was even more pro-ecological: he did not look at the natural environment from a utilitarian perspective nor at the human being (including his brethren) as mere *homo faber*. For him Nature was a source of joy, admiration, contemplation and gratitude for the gift of life. He believed that every being united with man in brotherhood reflects the presence of God and attracts us to Him. Saint Francis saw 'brothers' and 'sisters' of the human being in every creature and, therefore, felt obliged to respect their 'divine' origin.

Nevertheless, he discarded any forms of pantheism or attempts to deify nature clearly differentiating between the Creator and His creature [9, 10].

Thanks to Saint Francis, Christian ecology originated in the Middle Ages and has evolved ever since. Pilgrimages have contributed to this state of affairs extensively, as people walking to holy sites often stayed in places respected for religious or environmental reasons. A crucifix or a shrine would often be surrounded by trees or bushes, adorned with flowers or plants. What is more, certain plants and animals play a significant, symbolic role in Christian iconography [11].

However, Christian ecology in the academic sense evolved only in 1970s with a document inspired by Pope Paul VI and following his speech to the members of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). The Pope observed that since humanity is in unity with Nature, it is essential that Nature's brutal exploitation be replaced with respect towards the biosphere seen as a whole [12]. Paul VI's thinking was continued by John Paul II who called to change the current methods of protecting the Earth's resources and aim at sustainable and fair development, thus shaping environmental awareness in people. With such explicit statements one can have no doubts as to the Church's stance towards Ecology [13]. Ecological issues were also raised by Benedict XVI [14] and Pope Francis has made a substantial contribution to the matter appealing not only to Catholics or Christians but to all people sensitive to environmental issues. "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development." [15] His message goes beyond the previous teaching of the Catholic Church as it conveys broader and more comprehensive analyses and valid conclusions.

One must bear in mind that with its balanced attitude towards environmental issues, Christianity strongly rejects two fallacious viewpoints on the environment: excessive or insufficient recognition of the human's position in relation to Nature. In the first case, the human being can erroneously attribute to oneself divine prerogatives and feel entitled to implement a variety of, often extremely arrogant, ideas. In the second case, humans forget that among the visible creatures only they were formed in the image and likeness of the Creator. At the turn of the second and third millennium humanity's demeanour as if it was the absolute ruler of Nature, not recognizing Nature's rights and developmental opportunities, is a graver error. In Christian terms, the human being is "the only creature on Earth which God willed for itself" [16], yet this does not imply rejecting other creatures, trampling over their rights and heading for ecological crisis. The current symptoms of the ecological crisis should evoke a responsible feedback from everyone, Christians in particular, as "people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided" [17]. Being responsible for the natural environment refers not only to the present generation but to the future ones as well.

Christian thinkers find dramatic consequences of ecological recklessness to be, at their roots, the result of sin, which is parting from God. They attempt to discern the objective order of the world and determine a moral code accordingly, also with regard to ecological issues. The *Metanoia* of the human being, a permanent change of attitude (from being a master exploiting the Earth to a person that is capable of coexisting with Nature) is thought to be the way to counteract environmental degradation.

2. The genesis and symptoms of the ecological crisis

Environmental degradation, which carries serious consequences for the future of humanity, seems to be a fact that is being contested with less and less conviction. And yet most troubling is the attempt to determine the origin of this phenomenon. Within integral ecology, which refers to Catholic philosophy and theology, Pope Francis speaks most harshly about the effects of the ecological crisis. He claims that man has forgotten that “he comes from the dust of the Earth” and thus has highly contributed to the situation in which “this sister [Earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her” [15 p. 5]. What is more, policymakers mask or hide the symptoms of the ecological crisis, not having the courage to radically change their production and consumption patterns [15, p. 19].

Catholic personalism sees the deep roots of the ecological crisis above all in the very nature of the human being. Pope John Paul II had already diagnosed a person’s inability to discern the beauty of nature and the lack of caring for it adequately. Thus, he wrote, the human and ecological crises are intertwined. He regretted that: “people are rightly worried - though much less than they should be - about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of Nature in general, too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’*” [16, p. 51-52]

The Pope drew attention to a surprising paradox: humanity tries to take advantage of Nature as much as possible while posing a huge threat to it, and yet, at the same time, it “is paying the price in damage and injury” for its mistakes in this area [18]. Ecology cannot embrace caring only for the natural environment - without caring for human ecology it is impossible to avoid errors that lead to environmental degradation. Therefore, the postmodern person’s misunderstanding of the essence of being a human being, one’s deep moral crisis (which takes the form of e.g. the ecological ‘sin’), deepening consumerism, science and technology’s detachment from ethics, and last but not least, the lack of respect for life, including human life - all these are to blame for the poor condition of ecology.

‘The anthropological error’ is the underlying cause of the destruction of nature; its ‘rebellion’ is the outcome of humanity’s tyranny. Driven by the desire to possess things, immune to spiritual life, a person is no longer able to admire the beauty of Nature, to understand the message of God, Nature’s Creator. The human being misuses one’s freedom and ‘fails’ God when one devastates natural environment, develops an uncontrolled industry, “trampling with contempt this ‘bed’, which is our home, the Earth” [Jan Paweł II, *Trzeba zapobiec katastrofie ekologicznej*, Audiencja generalna, 17.01.2001, 3, http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/audiencje/ag_17012001.html, accessed on 20.11.2014]. The basis of ‘the ecological sin’ is therefore the sin of humanity, its main origin is the unwillingness to recognize God, the Creator of all Nature. Humanity can, of course, build a world without God or ethical standards, but nature will gradually ‘turn away’ from him which will be a huge price [19].

In the past, humanity lived in the face of a certain necessity, striving to meet the few needs arising from corporeality. Nowadays he wants to consume at all costs, satisfy a growing list of desires of sensual character in particular. Consumption, stimulated by scientifically improved marketing and the extensive advertising industry, no longer merely sustains the biological life of humanity but becomes, as if, the primary goal. It almost eliminates such areas as Science, morality, art and religion from the horizon of many people. Moreover, the postmodern person is ready to identify freedom, so dear to him, with the free choice among the huge market of goods and services, which is, in fact, senseless and one-dimensional. ‘Consumers’, preoccupied only with the desire to own, reject the rule that characterizes natural communities: take what you need and leave the rest alone. In a climate of mindless consumerism, people, in rich societies in particular, forget that the thoughtless use of natural resources threatens their existence further. It also contradicts the personal constitution of the human whose being cannot be reduced to satisfying only the needs of the body [16, p. 49-50; 17, p. 42-43].

Although the spirit of scientism is weaker now than at the turn of the century, it still contributes to overlooking the fundamental inadequacy between the degree of technical and spiritual development. It is the blind faith of humanity in technical means that is largely responsible for negating the ecological problem. Pope Francis observes, in a metaphorical and apt way, that modern human being, unlawfully claiming a right to be the absolute ruler of nature, fell into, as it were, technocratic exaltation [15, p. 76-78]. The one-dimensional technological paradigm based on the possession, domination and transformation of nature results in the fact that human interference, which has always taken place, does not entail accompanying Nature and adapting to the possibilities it offers. Without understatement, Pope Francis concludes that it is not even about benefit or prosperity, but about power. Nuclear energy, biotechnology, Computer science, knowledge of human DNA and other possibilities often offer their frightening potency to those who use their economic power in order to dominate Nature and people [15, p. 68-72]. Everything that is fragile, e.g. the environment, is defenceless against interests

and market laws that are currently being deified [15, p. 37-38]. Last but not least, this technological development does not go hand in hand with the growth of responsibility in humanity. Consequently, authentic humanity, as Pope Francis puts it metaphorically, “seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed, like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door” [15, p. 74-75]

Another factor that does not contribute to the formation of integral ecology but, unfortunately, dramatically classifies modern society, is the lack of respect for the life of plants and animals, as well as for human life. One cannot honestly and effectively defend Nature if, at the same time, one justifies actions that directly harm the very core of Creation - the existence of the human being. Standing for integral ecology, Pope Francis argues that the processes of degradation of the human and natural environment occur simultaneously. Moreover, the ecological crisis reflects the crisis of interpersonal relationships, especially in families [15, p. 32, 71; 20]. It is difficult to disagree with the papal statement that egoistic and tyrannical treatment of Nature results in economic and social inequalities that are plain to see [15, p. 21-22]. Misunderstood anthropocentrism, combined with relativism and pragmatism, gives rise to a pathological lifestyle in which, not only Nature, but also people are abused (treated as objects, forced to slavery, abandoned in case of uselessness, and finally sexually abused) [15, p. 80-81]. Under no circumstances can the world be analysed on the basis of one isolated aspect, for the book of Nature is one and indivisible. Today, the culture of rejection affects not only objects, which all too easily become rubbish threatening the environment, but also billions of excluded people [15, p. 12-13, 18].

3. The human being transcends Nature

Peter Singer, the Australian animal liberationist, promotes giving rights to animals on a principle almost similar to those relating to humans. He argues that the frequent emphasis on the dignity of the human person can contribute to species egoism and other creatures being treated as a means to meet human needs [21]. Within deep ecology the immanent value and equivalence of all beings is proclaimed, postulating respect for the rights of all beings as part of one whole without the hierarchy of beings typical for traditional cultures [22]. These and similar theses are aptly assessed by Pope Francis, who indicates the obsessive character of denying a person superiority over other species [15, p. 59-60]. In the light of Christian thought that refers directly to the Bible the natural environment is the object of admiration and contemplation, it is one of the ways in which God has spoken, the work of an excellent artist, which shows his genius and abilities. The Creator blesses all Nature, bestows goodness and beauty on it and gives it the most precious gift - life. While admiring Nature, a person contemplates the ‘image’ of God. From a Christian point of view it is obvious that God not only voluntarily created everything that exists, but He also continues to care for his creation with love. Michał Heller suggestively

comments on this: “the whole world is imbued with values. And although in the era of empirical methods we can witness insensitivity to values, the material world remains the carrier of ‘values’ because it is the realization of the Creator’s idea” [23]. Since Nature created by God has a value in itself, the human being is obliged to respect this value, continuing the Creator’s work, showing solidarity with all nature [24].

Despite its close relations with Nature, a human being, endowed with intelligence and love, is superior to the biological and animal world. It is, therefore, impossible to make all living beings equal - it would mean taking away a human being’s special value (which at the same time bestows serious responsibility on him) [15, p. 54-55]. It is the attitude of self-transcendence which relieves us from isolation and self-reference and is the source of caring for others and for the environment [15, p. 131]. Integral Christian ecology has its roots in the premise that it is the human person who has a special position among other living creatures; he is created in the image of God and is endowed with special dignity.

Thus, human beings must be in the centre of integral ecology as they are the only beings that strive to reveal the mystery of nature. Human beings are immanently ‘immersed’ in Nature, and yet they transcend it - their freedom, reflexivity and reason distinguish them from animals. Although they are organically the most helpless of all animals [25], at the beginning of life in particular, they transcend Nature. There is an inseparable bond between them and nature, but still, they are ‘cultural beings’, which thanks to their predictive, planned and joint activities produce the resources essential for their existence. It is this culture-based activity of humans that sets the limits of human expansion. While watching a dog lying in front of a newsagents’ Gabriel Marcel stated that there is a difference between merely existing and living, and that he has chosen to live reflectively [26]. Without depreciating the value of animal life, the philosopher rightly observed that animals are characterized only by passively being focused on consumption which is necessary to survive. However, the human being is the only entity that is capable of choosing being and, as a person, is predisposed to do this. The key term here is ‘choice’, a human’s ability to make free and rational decisions. This issue was aptly brought up by Roman Ingarden who pointed out that the human being, forced to live within nature, thanks to one’s special character must ‘overcome’ it, cross its borders. “Such is the dramatic fate of man. And yet it is there that his true nature comes to light: his genius and the finitude of his being.” [27] When he does not take up the challenge of discovering of what it is that enables him to transcend Nature, he cannot responsibly and reasonably refer to dilemmas regarding concern for the environment. An animal can adapt itself to changing conditions (autoplastically), but it cannot ‘alloplastically’ change the surrounding environment, which is typical of humanity. Animals seem to be more ‘satisfied’ with mere existence; plants make the impression of fusing with it completely [28].

A human's spirituality, the ability to value things, yields the right to live in a specific, exceptional way and determine the character of one's relationship with Nature. If one is to retain similarity to the Creator, one's stewardship should be one of wisdom and love. The human being is an autonomous subject, the source of one's actions, and yet dependent on the Creator. However, with one's unique status, the human being is God's only partner in the natural world, the as it were, "interlocutor" on Earth [29]. Created in the image and likeness of God, the human being has the right to subjugate the land in order to make a home worthy of the name. Nevertheless, the human being must remember that one's actions should be in accord with the greater cycle of life, which has its origin in God and embraces all Creation. Although God has set a mission for humanity to control Nature, it is to respect its laws, to be of service to Nature, not to be its absolute ruler. Therefore, its goal is undoubtedly the protection of natural resources and respect for its rights [30].

In order to comprehend the Christian idea of the human's stewardship one may associate it with 'caring for God's garden'. This metaphor emphasizes a special bond between the human being and God, not the masterful dominance over the world. If human beings are to be the gardeners of God's creation, they are to avoid any form of exploitation, abuse of Nature, its degradation or waste of its resources [31, 32]. Since humanity is 'the host of the world' it should exercise its dominion in a spirit of responsibility towards the One who is the First Host by His essence. Joseph Ratzinger observed that there are two types of authority in the Bible: in the first case the objective is to rule, the second results from obedience. The biblical Adam longs for power in the first sense, while Jesus Christ teaches the second. Reaching for the forbidden fruit, "Adam seeks knowledge as power, he wants to oppose God with equivalent power" [33]. The solution to the modern ecological crisis lies not in breaking with God, as is often proclaimed today, but on the contrary, in coming closer to God and imitating His care for the whole work of Creation.

4. Ecological culture - caring for the common good

In the face of the current ecological crisis Pope Francis justly argues that the common destiny of humankind should prompt people to care comprehensively for the natural environment [15, p. 6]. Our climate is a common good - everyone's and for everyone. On a global scale it is a complex system which significantly influences our life in every area [15, p. 19]. Caring for the climate implies joint activities of all inhabitants of the Earth, as actions taken in one region only will not bring expected results. Dialogue, therefore, is necessary if we are to make a difference, so even in the spirit of realism and pragmatism, we have to act together. Meanwhile, some people follow the myth of progress devoid of Ethics, others believe that since human race is harmful to the global ecosystem it would be advisable to limit the number of people on Earth [15, p. 40].

With regard to the ecological issue Christians are additionally motivated on a deeper level: their concern for the environment is the question of being faithful to the Creator [15, p. 43-47]. From a Christian perspective the ecological crisis is a call to a deep interior conversion. A special sensitivity to the degradation of the natural environment together with respect toward human dignity should prompt every Christian to reflect on one's own responsibility for the world [34]. If everything in the world is connected, then humanity cannot live as if separated from it since it constitutes an element of the bigger picture. Thus from a Christian standpoint, it is not enough to lament. Every person must take responsibility as the future of our environment depends on the action taken by each of us. For Christians *ecological conversion* means that "the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them" [15, p. 136]

This conversion is indispensable if the human being, thanks to Science and technology treated as gifts from God, is to wisely coexist with Nature, not devastating its resources [15, p. 67-68]. In response to concerns of certain societies, Pope Francis emphasizes that "nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way" searching for balance [15, p. 76]. Since humanity, as part of a mutually permeating reality, is obviously integrated into the natural environment it is essential that *integral ecology* be shaped, one that encompasses the harmonious unity of all relations: with God, other people and the Earth [15, p. 90-92]. Ecological culture means a completely different view on Nature, a new policy and educational program, a new way of life and spirituality fostered in various communities [15, p. 74; 35]. With Christian spirituality one can associate alternative understanding of the quality of life which may be rooted in contemplation, profound joy, avoiding obsessive consumerism. Such sobriety, free and conscious, is liberating. It is those who enjoy more each moment who can be satisfied with the simplest things [15, p. 139-141; 36].

5. Conclusions

Catholic academic reflection on the natural environment of humanity has evolved since 1970. Its basis is the Bible, the relationship between the Creator and His creation in particular. It wisely and responsibly refers to the words: God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good which imply respect towards the whole of Creation. In the Christian perspective, recognition of the beauty and goodness of Creation is associated with acknowledging the dignity of the human being seen as the main point of reference for Ecology. Thus, Christian ecology begins always with the conversion of the human heart, the everyday decisions and the respect towards the surrounding world. In the current teaching of the Church on Ecology the focus is on the change of thinking and behaviour of the human person in the spirit of responsibility for the created world. And yet for this *metanoia* to occur, both consistent education and comprehensive formation are needed (so that Christians will not only understand

the ecological needs of the moment but also consciously convert themselves, bearing in mind the Biblical concern for the environment). The ecological crisis can be overcome when the *metanoia* of the human conscience becomes real, when the human being discovers that he is a person and not a consumer devoid of objective axiology. The postmodern person must seek the sources of this re-evaluation in one's being a person, in the acts (characteristic only of humanity) of intellectual cognition, freedom and, last but not least, love [37, 38].

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