ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 15, No. 2, June 2021
Pages: 201-217

CHRISTIAN REFLEXIONS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Grave ecological damages threatening our planet and human lives are side effects of ambivalent technological progress and an overuse of resources by a consumer culture of a growing world population of 8 billion. They also must be attributed, however, to a one-sided worldview of mastery and greed requiring ethical as well as spiritual responses. The article starts with an analysis of the biblical creation narratives arguing that they are hardly responsible for present day ecological catastrophes stemming from a different time and cultural context. It rather is the predominance of a scientific mindset with its subject-object dichotomy that regards nature as useable matter only, without worth of its own. This ideology needs to be corrected. Romantic holism and evolutionism further reduce the human sense of responsibility required to mitigate damages already done. Ecological laws and regulations are of importance, but need to be founded in a new worldview. For this "cultural revolution" (*Laudato si'* 142) Christian ethics should rediscover basic virtues as a sense of humility vis-a-vis the given reality as of measure and most of all gratitude for creation and its beauty of which humans are but a part.

Keywords: Creation Narratives; Cultural Revolution; Ecological Anthropology; Ecological Ethics; Ecological Spirituality; Ecological Virtues; *Laudato si'*

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The side effects of technical and economic progress increasingly overshadow the positive sides of modern scientific, technical as well as organizational inventions which are required for the survival of a global population of 8 billion. It is first and foremost natural limits and the ensuing environmental crisis, which raises doubts about the path modernity has taken. To do justice to the enormous dynamics and the forces unleashed, a "courageous, cultural revolution" in all areas is needed, as Pope Francis writes in his encyclical *Laudato sí*.[1]

This "revolution" requires a fundamental new understanding of and a non-utilitarian respect for nature, theologically speaking a fundamental *metanoia* of humankind. Since there exists no way to go back to a life as was prevalent before modernity, since this would bring about unimaginable humanitarian disasters, the urgent question is how this transformation in all walks of life can be brought about and what can and indeed must be the contribution of religious communities and of Christian churches in particular so as to change our outlook with regard to the world and creation and develop attitudes that can help to overcome the present threatening crisis.

In his epochal work *The Imperative of Responsibility* the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas formulates the dilemma in the following way:

> …For the very same movement that has given us the power the use of which must now be regulated by norms—the movement of modern knowledge in the form of natural science—has *inevitably washed away the foundations* from which norms could be derived, and even destroyed the mere idea of norms as such... At first this knowledge 'neutralized' nature in terms of value, then it did the same to humans. *Now we tremble in the nudity of a nihilism, in which the greatest power is paired with the greatest emptiness,* the greatest ability with the least knowledge what this development is for. The question is whether, without *restoring the sacred*, which was most thoroughly destroyed by scientific enlightenment, *as a category* we can have an ethic that is able to curb the extreme powers that we have today and that we continually acquire and that we are almost forced to exercise.[2]

Modernity thus has, as the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks aptly said, "outsourced morality" and disavowed the sacred in a way, that leads to a threatening reduction of the spiritual as well as intellectual

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[1]Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si'*. On Care of Our Common Home, No. 114. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (2.5.2020).

[2]H. Jonas, *Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, 57. (English translation IG). (*The Imperative of Responsibility In Search for the Ethics of a Technological Age,* Chicago: Chicago University Press 1984).

resources that would be direly needed to cope with the environmental damage. This pessimism thereby must not be made absolute, but it is to be taken seriously as well as the responsibility that goes with it last but not least for those who believe.

In the following the question is to be asked: Which contributions can the Christian faith make to overcome the dilemmas? It will be treated in three points: What does the belief in nature being created by God mean with regard to the human attitude towards it? Which elements of Christian anthropology and ethics are of particular importance for an environmental ethics and spirituality? And finally, Which virtues from a particular Christian inspiration, which can be shared by others, could lead to a new and more life-giving relationship of humans with their natural environment?

1. The World as Creation: Biblical Cosmology and Its Contribution to a Christian View of the Natural World

For all monotheistic religions nature and with it human beings have been created by God, who freely decided to form a world outside of Himself out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). For Christian theology this act of creation is not an activity of a distant past which has been completed long ago, but it is a continuous act throughout time also in the here and now, that is, a continuous creation (*creatio continua*). Humans have been created to participate in this ongoing process, they are co-creators enabled by their very nature to cooperate with and imitate God in his work, which is the source of their creativity.

For the German sociologist Max Weber this idea of creation first voiced in Jewish monotheism is the precondition for the existence of a rational and morally responsible human person, because these qualities presuppose an understanding of the world around us that clearly distinguishes between God, the creator, and his creation. This for Weber constitutes the major difference between a monotheistic and a mythical worldview. The belief in the existence of a variety of invisible intermediate beings, like spirits, fairies, local gods and demons, etc. which need to be pacified by sacrifices does not allow for a rational attitude towards the world as a whole. Only the belief in *one* God could create those spaces of freedom that are needed to rationally deal with the world and take rational ethical decisions.[3]

[3]M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie,* Vol. III, Tübingen 1988, 6. This view is today sometimes widened in axial age theories, cf. I. Gabriel, "Antigone war nicht nur hier. Die Achsenzeittheorie als Grundlage einer globalen Kultur der

Only because of the disempowerment of spirits, some of which are benevolent and others hostile, but who always have their own claims, humans could gain that confidence in the world surrounding them that made rational choices possible. It is moreover the belief that it has been created by God and is subordinate to his will that makes it possible for humans to trust in its immutable natural laws and make it a reliable place for human actions. Trust in God thus constitutes the very basis for the belief in the coherence of reality. This may be called ontological or metaphysical side of monotheism.

Its ethical flipside is that humans are responsible towards God, in whose image they are created. What has been called the original "disenchantment" of the world and the consequent ban on magical practices constitute the precondition of a way of dealing with the world in rational ways. The trust in universal natural laws and their technical application seems only possible if predictable natural causal relations exist which are the result in the belief in God as the creator who can be trusted.

The two narratives about creation to be found in the book of Genesis (Gen 1-2) date from the 6th and the 10th century BC. Both are etiological, i.e. have an explanatory character, and mutually interpret each other. Their overall goal is to demonstrate God's purpose in the creation of humanity. As such they are universal and precede the following histories of the Hebrew bible which focus on one people starting with Abraham in Genesis 12 and dealing with Yahweh's redemptive action for Israel and through Jesus Christ. They thus define the cosmological framework of the history of salvation and are a succinct reflection on the human condition in this cosmos. The first part describes the world as it *should be* according to the intention of its creator. The second part the "fallen creation" deformed by sin and afflicted by evil as *it is* in reality (*mysterium iniquitatis*, original sin). The rupture takes place in the text between Genesis 1–2 and the etiological narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3, which is followed by the murder of Cain (Genesis 4) and the story of the great deluge (Genesis 5/6–9). The latter ends with the assurance of hope that God will stand with his creation forever despite human wickedness. Obviously, these creation narratives are no scientific reports, but contain a specific cosmology and related to it an anthropology. The creation of the cosmos in six days, the seventh day being a day of rest (Sabbath) shows that in them nature and culture are interwoven and

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Menschenrechte?" in Patricia Hladschick / Fiona Steinert, ed., *Menschenrechte*, Wien, 2019, 719–730.

that the text is not about the past.[4] The Sabbath as a day of rest constitutes the culmination of God's work.[5] The weekly periodization calls for a cult praxis and the creation by Yahweh is paralleled with human work, which thus is assigned special meaning (which it did not have, e.g. in European cultures of antiquity). This leads to the important insight that the way in which humans understand their natural environment is always and everywhere inseparably intertwined with cultural notions and is necessarily embedded in a worldview that encompasses all other aspects of thinking and acting, in other words it is not culturally neutral.

At this point some comments regarding the environmental question are to be added. The so-called priestly writing from the 6th century BC starts with the words: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. But the earth was desolate and empty (Hebrew *tohu wabohu*, 'dark pathless desert') and darkness was over the great flood... and God's spirit (Hebrew *ruah*, other meanings: "life," "breath") hovered over the water" (Gen 1:1). The unshaped matter thus becomes a cosmos through the divine act of creation. This process begins with the creation of light and darkness (first day), in the following days sky, earth and sea, which—as common in the ancient Near East—are presented as three local spheres (second day), the plants (third day) as well as the sun, moon and stars (fourth day) are created. The latter indicates that the change of times and festivals are thus determined, again pointing to the interlinkage of nature and culture. The creation of aquatic animals and birds (fifth day) as well the other animals, land and wild animals (sixth day) is then for the first time associated with a blessing to propagate, which is to show that the existence of these higher animals is more at risk than that of other creatures. This applies to an ever-larger degree to humans, who are created—together with the majority of animals, a fact sometimes overlooked—on the sixth and last day. It is last but not least for this reason, that the consummation of animal meat is not allowed according to the original creation story, but is allowed only after the deluge (Genesis 9:3f). This permits a first insight relevant to current environmental questions: It is not only humans which are created on the sixth day. The author of Genesis rather includes them in the

[4]Cf. E. Zenger, *Gottes Bogen in den Wolken. Untersuchungen zur Komposition und Theologie der priesterschriftlichen Urgeschichte*, 2nd Ed., Stuttgart, 1987.

[5]For Jürgen Moltmann the climax of creation is not man but the Shabbat, cf. J. Moltmann, "Die ökologische Wende in der christlichen Theologie," in M. Biehl, B. Kappes, B. Wartenberg-Potter, ed., *Grüne Reformation. Ökologische Theologie*, Hamburg 2017, 27–40. These are, however, two different categories, one institutional and one refers to the ethical responsibility of humans.

creation of higher animals. In this sense they are not special. Their specificity rather results from a final addition: "Let us make man in our image after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground. God created man in his image (*säläm*), in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26f).

We have here a clear indication of the doublesided and indeed intermediate position of humans: he/ she physically belongs to the sphere of animals,[6] but they also have a special position in nature as being created in the image of God. The Hebrew word *selem* has the original meaning "statue" or "portrait." It refers to a common practice in the ancient Near East to place a statue of a ruler (sometimes also a god) on the town square (or in the temple) so as to set him present that way. According to the basic statement of the text, man re-presents thus the deity or the ruler, who ultimately is God. This is primarily of ethical importance. The life of Adam (*adamah*, "little man") should and must be respected because he/ she sets God present. This is the foundational insight of Christian anthropology and ethics.[7] The natural side of the human being is connected with liveliness, vulnerability, finiteness and ultimately mortality. The transcendent side with specifically human abilities such as intellect, will and individual creativity are derived from the image of God.[8] Together with the promise of multiplication and the so-called mandate of rule: "God blessed them and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, populate the earth, subject them, and rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky and over all the animals that move in the country" (Gen 1:28).

This verse is often cited to prove that this mentality has been responsible for the environmental disasters lying at the basis of a Western mindset furthering domination over nature. Since this criticism is primarily directed against Christianity it needs to be dealt with briefly. There are several reasons which—despite its popularity—make this hypothesis untenable. First there is the text

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[6]The sequence in the creation of creatures is closer to the theory of evolution than one would expect, even though the composition follows theological criteria.

[7] B. Janowski, K. Liess, ed., *Der Mensch im alten Israel: Neue Forschung zur alttestamentlichen Anthropologie*, Freiburg/ Basel/ Wien, 2009; *Ch. Frevel*, ed., *Biblische Anthropologie: Neue Einsichten aus dem Alten Testament*, Freiburg/ Basel/ Wien, 2010; M. Konradt, E. Schläpfer, ed., *Anthropologie und Ethik im Frühjudentum und im Neuen Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen*, Tübingen, 2014.

[8]Th. von Aquin, *Summe der Theologie* II-I, Foreword, ed. and transl. by J. Bernhart, Vol II, 3rd revised and improved edition, Stuttgart 1985, p 1.

itself. The Hebrew word *raddah* means "to lead to pasture land" and signals an understanding of imperial power analogous to the pastoral profession, which was typical in the Old Orient.[9] The image in the background does not stand for an arbitrary despot, but for a caring king. This interpretation is confirmed by the second creation narrative (Gen 2:4b–24) which is older, but placed after the more recent text. According to it God formed man out of clay, blew into him the breath of life and the woman created from his rib and gave to them the world as a garden, Eden, to be cultivated. The rule motive of Genesis 1:28 is interpreted here as a command for the cultivation of the land. The idea common to all monotheisms is that the Creator God created the world, that is, nature, and instructed humans to rule over his creation and thereby imitate the just rule of God, who cares for his creatures. Ecological theology therefore rightly speaks of a human stewardship over nature, which stands in contrast to arbitrariness and exploitation.

A second reason why half a sentence from the bible cannot be made responsible for modernity's environmental disasters is the anachronism of such an interpretation. It overlooks completely that humans all through history have lived in very precarious circumstances vis-à-vis nature. As a *Mängelwesen* (Arnold Gehlen), deficient beings, humans had to fight for their survival year after year in an unfavourable environment. Crop failures, vermin, droughts and all kinds of natural calamities led for the largest part of history and up to this day to famines which threatened the life of the species. The present situation in which man endangers his own existence as well as that of other beings could impossibly be foreseen by the biblical authors in the first millennium BC. It was as inconceivable then as was the construction of airplanes, microchips or atomic bombs. In other words, the criticism is a rather crude form of general religious criticism, aimed at Christianity, which does not hold to closer scrutiny, not to speak of the fact that at the same time religions is often accused of having held back science and technology.

If one wants to find the root causes for the ambivalent developments which led to the present catastrophe in the making one

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[9]For more recent bible-exegetical research, cf. Ch. Hardmeter / K. Ott, "Biblische Schöpfungstheologie," in K. Ott / J. Dierks / L. Voget-Kleschin, ed., *Handbuch Umweltethik*, Stuttgart, 2016, 183–189; E.M. Conradie, *Christianity. An Ecological Critique of Christianity and a Christian Critique of Ecological Destruction*, in W. Jenkins / M. Evelyn Tucker / J. Grim, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, New York, 2017, 70–78. C. Amery, *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums,* Hamburg, 1972; in English it is Lynn White's criticism of Christianity.

has to look elsewhere. The "disenchantment of the world" (Max Weber) is the result of a long series of historical processes that were neither linear nor inevitable. Only in the last stage of these complex developments man started to consider himself as a counterpart to the rest of nature. What might be called a Cartesian subject-object dichotomy reduced the two-sided character of human existence to *one* dimension. Different from the bible which regards man as belonging to the animal world created on the sixth day *and* endowed with Godlike qualities he/she was now seen as a (transcendent) consciousness. He/ she no longer belonged to nature but became a purely rational being, standing *above* nature. Detached from this natural basis, man saw himself as opposite to physical matter, which moreover was no longer God's creation thus losing any intrinsic value, becoming pure matter. It is in this dichotomy of man as subject and the rest of creation as object which he/she can dispose of it as he pleases and for his own benefit, that led to a one-sided world view. Hand in hand with the anthropological model of modernity goes an understanding of man as an owner, worker and researcher who can and indeed should exercise total control over nature. Work thus is the "producer and redeemer" of a new person[10] whose aim it is to emancipate himself from biological nature.[11] It is only now that man's relationship with nature is understood as a relationship of arbitrary rule. There no longer exists an inherent linkage between him/her and the other creatures. In contrast to the biblical creation narratives the interdependency of all living beings through their biological existence is being lost. They become pure matter to be used. The psalms show a rather different world view. It is the whole of nature and its cosmic dynamics which praises the Creator:

> The heavens praise the glory of God, the firmament announces the work of his hands. One day tells the other, one night makes known to the other, without words and without speaking, her voice remains inaudible, but her message goes out all over the world, her message to the ends of the earth (Ps 19:2–7).

These texts, which are the central prayer book for Christians (as for Jews) thus show in multiple ways, that from a biblical point of view, all of nature is much more than inanimate matter. It has a life and dignity of its own. Their poetry could contribute to rediscovering the

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[10]N. Leser, "Christliche und marxistische Anthropologie," in N. Leser, *Jenseits von Marx und Freud*, Wien, 1980, 67.

[11]Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age,* Cambridge, 2007, especially 221–298. The subject-object dichotomy of modernity is underpinned by deism, which sees creation analogous to a machine no longer in need of God's intervention.

intrinsic value of nature also for Christian theology. There are also great Christian mystics, most prominently Francis Assisi (1181 / 1182–1226), a prayer of whom is found at the beginning of the encyclical *Laudato si.* In a certain sense one could therefore say that Christianity does not have a concept of the *environment* – because nature as creation in the biblical sense never forms an environment to man, something that surrounds him, but men and women are part of this physical world in all its dimensions.

2. Man as Co-Creator and Keeper of a Creation in Evolution

In addition to the subject-object dualism, modernity is characterized by a model of progress, as its name already indicates. This deterministic or at least programmatic idea that developments are to permanently overshoot and go beyond themselves, is its most prominent feature. It is also an ominous characteristic because it simply contradicts the natural limits of the created world as it exists. Nature is not limitless, neither are its resources. To think otherwise is to negate reality, which must lead to disaster. The assumption that progress can be unending because there are no underlying restrictions is one of the reasons for the fundamental crisis we find ourselves in today, last but not least for the present environmental problems. Modernity has brought about impressive achievements. As stated at the beginning of this article, it would otherwise be unthinkable for nearly 8 billion humans to live on this planet. Humankind indeed multiplied. The central weakness of its intellectual framework was, however, from the very beginning, that it ignored its natural limits. The same holds true, by the way, for its "barbaric back side,"[12] that is, the negative consequences of scientific and technical innovations are largely overlooked and played down. It is this negative side of modern inventions which lead to multiple problems. An attitude that disregards their side effects, e. g. of atomic energy or weaponry, resembles that of a gambler who is ready to take ever higher risks in order to win the game. In this sense the German sociologist Ulrich Beck wrote about the modern society being a "risk society."[13]

That this has been a characteristic of modernity from its very beginnings is shown by the fact that already the German classic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recognized this inherent danger. In his

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[12] J. Habermas, "Israel und Athen. Wem gehört die anamnetische Vernunft?" in J.B. Metz et al., ed., *Diagnosen zur Zeit*, Düsseldorf 1994, 52.

[13] U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, 22nd Ed., Frankfurt am Main, 2015.

poem "The Sorcerer Apprentice," he tells the story of an apprentice who when the master left the house starts to call spirits to carry water buckets for his bath. But he does not know how to stop them and with them the process he has set into motion. Thus, instead of further improvement the whole house is being flooded until the Master comes and says the saving word. Such a Master cannot be expected in reality, however.

Goethe's scepticism vis-à-vis modern developments was also voiced in romantic counter-movements all over Europe at the beginning of the 19th century and which criticised a purely rationalistic world view. The answer has to be a "movement towards holism" and a "return to nature." The original unity with nature, which was pictured in an over idyllic manner, was to be restored. This "re-enchantment" of the world was not only directed against modernity but also against monotheistic "disenchantment" which had robbed nature of its divinity.[14] Today's neo-romanticism and esoteric movements are descendants from this romantic worldview. Also, here a one-sided rationalistic modernity is to be overcome by a nostalgic longing for a wholesome natural life. This nostalgic view, however, has its flipside. It tends to eliminate or at least reduce human responsibility. Human beings are now not opposed to nature, but they are an integral part having no special dignity, role and task in it. Can, however, the belief in a world populated by ghosts and gods contribute to solving present day ecological problems? Or is it rather a form of escapism from human responsibility? After all, animals did not create bombs and manipulated genes. Moreover, in the face of a growing world population, for whom the decline of a technical civilization would result in unimaginable humanitarian catastrophes, this cannot be an option. Obviously, in the current ecological situation, human prudence and creative responsibility at their highest are required to deal with the consequences of modernity in a way that minimizes the damage inflicted without creating even more ills. A nostalgic natural mysticism, aimed at a unity of humans and nature that because of original sin never existed, rather distracts from this gigantic task and responsibility-oriented view of the world.

The other highly influential intellectual movement to overcome the subject-object dichotomy of modernity opposed to natural romanticism is biological evolutionism. Although it has developed

[14]Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Gods of Greece": "To enrich one amongst all, this world of gods had to pass away," F. Schiller, *Gedichte*, 2nd Ed., Berlin 2013, 127.

in various forms,[15] these have in common the hypothesis that human beings are just another mammal in the chain of an evolution, the basis of which is the *survival of the fittest* through struggle and natural selection. It is no longer human who through her/his actions sets the direction for historical developments, but the self-determined evolutionary process. This worldview leaves hardly any room for human freedom and responsibility. In this sense it is similar to its counterpart, namely natural romanticism. It therefore does not seem to be compatible with Christian or immanent humanism, the basic assumption of both being that human freedom exists and is to be exerted in a responsible way. The notion of dignity thus becomes also obsolete. The attractiveness of evolutionism stems from the fact that it seems to be in accordance with science and allows for an exit from the Cartesian worldview fixed on human reason, at the same time propagating the idea of progress central for modernity by reinterpreting it in an evolutionist way.[16]

The palaeontologist and Jesuit P. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the first half of the 20th century already presented a theological hypothesis on evolution. It cannot be elaborated on here in detail. However, it could show a theological way to reassess the notion of progress. According to Teilhard, the current phase of anthropogenesis (today called anthropocene) challenges humans to freely develop their human potential of ethical creativity. In his central work *Man in the Cosmos*[17] further evolution depends on the perception of this responsibility by present and future generations. Progress for Teilhard is not an automatic or natural evolutionary event. It is the consequence of human actions powered by spiritual energies. Its ultimate criterion cannot be but the development of every single person, man and woman, as well as the general welfare of the world in the realization of humane standards.[18] "Progress

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[15]Cf. Ph. Sarasin (Ed.): Evolution: ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch, Stuttgart (et al.) 2010; R. Langthaler / H. Ph. Weber (Ed.): Evolutionstheorie und Schöpfungsglaube. Neue Perspektiven der Debatte, Göttingen 2013.

[16]This may be one of the reasons for its current boom cf S. Pinker: Gewalt: eine neue Geschichte der Menschheit, 2nd Ed., Frankfurt am Main 2016; id.: Aufklärung jetzt: für Vernunft, Wissenschaft, Humanismus und Fortschritt: eine Verteidigung, Frankfurt am Main 2018; Y. N. Hariri: Homo Deus: eine Geschichte von Morgen, München 2017; Id.: 21 Lektionen für das 21. Jahrhundert, München 2018.

[17]P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Der Mensch im Kosmos*, München, 1959 (Original: Le phénomène humain, Paris 1955).

[18]P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Comment je crois* (Œuvres, vol. 10), Ed. du Seuil, Paris 1969, 132.

means becoming more humane or it means nothing!"[19]—he writes in one of his unpublished works. For Teilhard de Chardin such progress has its final measure in Christ, who represents man in his divine perfection and constitutes the goal of all mankind as of the universe. Progress thus is the result of human actions intending to humanize the world in all its dimensions. It is the task of religion to promote this progress and thus strengthen the sources of the *élan vital*, the joy of life and action.[20] Such a non-deterministic model of progress, not based on the will to power as with Nietzsche, can be linked to Christianity and its ethics, as well as to that of other religions. It takes human freedom serious and does not exclude the possibility of massive setbacks and apocalyptic developments. In this sense Pope Francis wrote in his inaugural exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: "We face great responsibility here, because some current situations, if they cannot find good solutions, can trigger dehumanization processes that are difficult to reverse."[21]

The question of today is: How can a purely instrumental modern approach to nature, firmly anchored in present consciousness worldwide, be changed effectively? Will it be possible to stop the colonization of all areas of life by natural sciences, technology and economics without a total rejection of technology throwing the child out with the bathtub? Is it feasible to promote a world view in which humans are not absolute rulers of the earth, but responsible guardians? In other words, how can a view of nature which ultimately also depersonalizes the human being as a *res cogitans* be reversed without hampering necessary scientific and technical developments which help to mitigate the environmental crisis?

The final section aims to show some Christian attitudes and virtues which make sense to all human beings that could help to counteract the present destructive approach to nature and its resources. Such "virtue ethics," it must be added, in no way contrary to structural and legal measures which are urgently needed.[22] Today, more than

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[19]"Le *progrès – être plus*, ou bien il ne signifie rien." P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Sur le Progrès* (unpublished), quoted in *Th. Broch: Das Problem der Freiheit im Werk von Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,* Mainz 1977, 322.

[20]P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Der Mensch im Kosmos*.

[21]Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 51. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (3.5.2020).

[22]See I. Gabriel, "Ökologie als Frage nach dem neuen Menschen," in M. Biehl / B. Kappes / B. Wartenberg-Potter, ed., *Grüne Reformation. Ökologische Theologie*, Hamburg, 2017, 83-108; see also I. Gabriel / P. Steinmair-Pösel, ed., *Gerechtigkeit in einer endlichen Welt. Ökonomie-Wirtschaft-Ethik*, 2nd Ed., Ostfildern, 2014.

ever, there exists a great need for institutions, laws and regulations so as to better protect the environment on a global, national and regional level. Without them, the damage already inflicted on nature cannot be reduced and the poorer parts of the world population who are most exposed to the effects of environmental degradation cannot be protected.[23] That being said, however, it seems clear that they are not sufficient but must be complemented by the development of individual attitudes in large numbers of people that are the basis for an ecologically sensitive policy.[24]

3. Some Ecological Virtues: A Christian Perspective

1. *Humilitas:* Recognizing the Limits of Nature

Any type of limits, including those of natural resources constitute a challenge not only for our lives but also regarding our readiness to accept them. This has always been the case. We want to indulge in limitlessness, but it has become even more so because the modern worldview turns this wish into an ideology. In this sense a prominent ecologist and economist, Herman Daly, writes: "We do not know, how to organize an economy in balance and hold an ideology of limitlessness in a nearly religious way."[25] This is in itself rather surprising and indeed awkward, since limits constitute an ubiquitous and obvious fact of life, of human as well as natural reality. Limits can be of a physical nature, but also vulnerability, imperfection and ultimately mortality are fundamental limits of all life. Due to his freedom, human is, moreover fallible (biblically speaking sinful). These are obvious and irrefutable anthropological truths which constitute a necessary point of reference for any form of ethical rationality. Traditionally recognizing this has been termed *humilitas,* which always has been a central virtue of Christian ethics. Though the term has often been abused, ecologically it regains a new meaning. Etymologically derived from *humus*, "earth," it points to the fact that humans are part of nature and depend on the earth as a natural habitat.

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[23]K. Ott / J. Dierks / L. Voget-Kleschin, ed., *Handbuch Umweltethik*, 322-360; D. Demko / B. S. Elger / C. Jung et al., ed., *Umweltethik interdisziplinär*, Tübingen, 2016.

[24]With regard to the contribution of the churches to environmental ethics and spirituality see the rich literature on *Laudato si'* (2015), for Orthodox Church, J. Chryssavgis, ed., *On Earth as in Heaven. Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, New York, 2012, for Protestantism, M. Biehl / B. Kappes / B. Wartenberg-Potter, ed., *Grüne Reformation. Ökologische Theologie*, Hamburg, 2017 with further literature.

[25]Cf. Jorgen Randers, *Eine globale Prognose für die nächsten 40 Jahre. Der neue Bericht an den Club of Rome,* München 2013 (2nd ed), 99.

This attitude of *humilitas* stands in contrast to what since ancient times has been called *hybris* (pride), an attitude of human self-exaggeration going hand in hand with a lack of recognition of limits with regard to human possibilities. The modern idea that there are no limits to human ingenuity is a modern form of this hybris and an illusion not in accordance with reality. Without negating the vast abilities of human creativeness, the technical and scientific mastery of nature has its limits and the side-effects of inventions are becoming more and more risky. Assumptions of the limitlessness of science and technical progress run counter to a self-reflective attitude of *humilitas*, which takes into account limits and refuses the seductive illusion of limitlessness. Such sober realism is in high demand today. It is not sceptic against technologies which drive ecological improvements, but recognizes their limitations as well as those of natural resources. Only this way it becomes possible to take a new view of life and be attentive to the intrinsic value of all creatures.[26]

2. The Virtue of Measure

In Greek philosophy and for all ethical systems up to modernity measure along with prudence was considered a fundamental virtue. They were in this sense adopted in early Christianity.[27] Already Aristotle knew that this human measure practised in the various walks of life has an individual component, but it is not arbitrary. People can survive in colder or hotter climate, but at a certain point a region becomes inhabitable for the human race, as for instance the Antarctic. Opposed to the virtue of modesty is the vice of *pleonexia,* which for the Greeks denoted a lifestyle dominated by desire to own ever more. It is worth noting that this wish for ever more, in all ethics, religious or not, has been regarded as a vice, which is harmful for persons as well as for society as a whole. It is only in modern economic thinking that it becomes an essential driving force of progress and thus a public virtue, as Bernard Mandeville calls it in his famous "Fable of the Bees" (1714). Its negative social side effects are thereby ignored.[28] On the contrary, religions and premodern philosophical worldviews assume alike that any form of excess—be it

[26]This would be of considerable importance for animal ethics, cf. M. Lintner, *Der Mensch und das liebe Vieh. Ethische Fragen im Umgang mit Tieren,* Wien, 2017.

[27]A. Dihle, "Demut," in Th. Klauser, ed., *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Vol. III, Stuttgart, 1957, 736-778.

[28] I. Gabriel, "Wozu taugt die Tugend? Überlegungen zur Aktualität der Tugendethik," in K. Baier / M. Riedenauer, ed., *Die Spannweite des Daseins: Philosophie, Theologie, Psychotherapie und Religionswissenschaft im Gespräch. Festschrift für Augustinus Wucherer-Huldenfeld zum 80. Geburtstag*, Wien, 2011, 199-219.

by individuals or entire societies—endangers human life and peace. This simple wisdom can only remain hidden as long as technical and economic progress push the level of the use of goods upwards, whereby crises and revolutions now and then show, however, the fragility of an economic dynamics that raises desires without being able to fulfil them for all. It is this mentality of greed which is fundamentally put into question by the current environmental crisis. The question, "how much is enough?," comes again to the fore.[29] This need not be bad, because it can lead to a lifestyle that is more conducive to human well-being. It constitutes, however also a central question of justice. It is obvious that the lifestyle now practiced in the richer and more industrialized regions cannot become that of a world population of 8 billion and by the middle of the century probably about 11 billion people. Even considering that there will be technical advances, the natural resources will not suffice.[30] Only by the practice of prude abstinence and a certain renunciation with regard to material goods can fights and wars for resources be avoided. A new, positively connoted view of "the limits of growth" and individual self-limitation are becoming thus an ethical imperative. This acceptance of limits thereby must not be regarded as an evil. It can enhance inner freedom and satisfaction. The wisdom of all religions teaches that simplicity and frugality can contribute to a richer human and spiritual life.[31] The reduction of material needs and not their expansion leads to a fullness, which is inevitably hampered by an access of consumption leading to an alienation of humans from nature and themselves. In this sense St Basil writes: "Poor is he who has many needs."[32] This is obviously at odds with a modern style of life. A looming ecological catastrophe however points towards the fact that we have to regain this wisdom in a finite world. We therefore need a new sense of modesty, accepting to reduce our needs as an expression of solidarity as well as sustainability.

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[29]R. and E. Skidelsky, *Wie viel ist genug? Vom Wachstumswahn zu einer Ökonomie des guten Lebens,* München, 2013.

[30] So *De iustitia in mundo* from 1971 11. Available at: https://de.readkong.com/page/de-iustitia-in-mundo-1971-welt-bischofssynode-in-rom-7838250 (3.5.2020).

[31]Consumer research also shows that a reduction in consumption creates more freedom and satisfaction, cf. J. Schor, *Wahrer Wohlstand: Mit weniger Arbeit besser Leben*, München 2016.

[32]B. von Cäsarea, "Sechste Predigt (Mauriner-Ausgabe Nr. 6): An die Reichen," in B. von Cäsarea, *Des heiligen Kirchenlehrers Basilius des Großen Bischofs von Cäsarea ausgewählte Schriften*, translated from Greek, Vol. II, München, 1925, 248. Available at: http://www.unifr.ch/bkv/kapitel.php?abschnittnr=2630 (3.5.2020).

The question, how much a person need to live a decent and good life?, must therefore be asked anew. One way to do this could be to revive the old fasting regulations to be found in Christianity as in other religions, so as among other things, to reduce meat consumption, which heavily contributes to CO2 levels. If such insights and religiously founded practices were to turn into social trends, a more modest lifestyle could emerge that better takes into account the natural limits and recognizes the intrinsic value of things created.

3. Gratitude: The Essence of a Christian Worldview

The modern view of the world which sees humans as creators of all things as well as of his/her own self, frequently combined with the illusion that it is success what solely counts, clearly contradicts the social and ecological realities. Every person from the beginning to the end is embedded in a variety of social relationships and depends on natural as well as social resources, culture and religion, which have not been produced by the individual. Gratitude means a basic attitude that recognizes the debt we all have to others as well as to social, historical, religious and natural resources which are given to as gifts prior to our individual existence. Gratitude helps to better understand the natural beauty of things in their uniqueness and not only as a means of material satisfaction. In Christian terms, nature becomes creation and with it an expression of God's care and love. This biblical understanding finds its poetic expression in many psalms:

> You care for the country and water it, you shower it with wealth... The brook of God is abundantly filled you create grain for it: so you arrange everything. You water the furrows, level the clods, soften them with rain, bless their plants, you crown the year with your kindness, your traces are followed by abundance. The meadows are emblazoned in the step the heights gird themselves with cheers. The pastures adorn themselves with herds, the valleys shroud in grain, they cheer and sing (Ps 65:10–13)

The gratitude for the gifts of the earth is at the same time a praise of their creator, whose goodness is present in all things he created.[33] Obviously, this does not mean that humans have no contribution to make. The cultivation of the land is the condition for its bearing fruit. But the world is not just a task, it is prior a gift. The importance of

[33]This was a basic insight of early theology. Especially Maximus Confessor (580-662) represented such a cosmic theology, cf. D. Munteanu, "Cosmic Liturgy. The Theological Dignity of All Creation as Basis of an Orthodox Ecotheology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 4 (2010) 332–344.

gratitude in Christianity is shown by the fact that its central cultic celebration is called the Eucharist (Greek: "Thanksgiving"). In it, the gifts of the earth are offered to God in gratitude, so that they may be changed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the earth may be renewed so that the original goodness of creation is restored.[34] Humans cannot create a perfect world. However, they are mandated to act in the here and now in a way so that human life and all creatures are promoted and may flourish. Environmental ethics and spirituality should create the reflective basis for it.

Concluding Remarks

The destructions of the natural basis of human existence have reached frightening dimensions because of lifestyles driven by the law of material growth. What has been initiated by humans can only be reversed by humans' ethical sense of responsibility based on a fundamental re-thinking (*metanoia*) of priorities and a new spirituality. In addition to laws and regulations that can but mitigate existing damages we need a new mindset based on practiced virtues founded in a more spiritual view of nature, humility, measure and gratitude to build a less materialistic and more humane culture. Christian ethics could take a lead in creating this new vision of human development.

[34]Cf. P. Teilhard de Chardin, "Messe über die Welt," in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Das Herz der Materie*, Olten, 1990, 120–140.