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THE BIBLE AND HUMAN ACTIVITY ON MOTHER EARTH

Religions in general have been traditionally teaching their followers other-worldly concerns and a supramundane spirituality. The life and activity of the humans here on earth were understood more as a preparation for a life that is to come. The world was understood as the secular and the profane, and consequently it was treated as evil. The Christians were exhorted not to love the world: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever" (1 Jn 2: 15-17). James, another New Testament author wrote: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

At the same time we also read in the same New Testament: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3: 16). In fact, Christian belief about the incarnation of God that God became a human being is based on the conviction that God is concerned about the world and that the humankind also should have a positive attitude towards the world. This conviction is gaining momentum among the Christians in our times especially because of the growing interest among them for the study of the Bible. The Patristic and Medieval spirituality of the contempt of the world and the flight from the world recommended by spiritual and ascetical writers is now giving way to a new approach of recognizing the positive meaning and values of the world. In fact, the Second Vatican Council has promulgated a historic document which spells out very clearly the task of the Church to be in the world and also to be the servant of the world. In very glowing terms this document speaks about the

dignity of the human person, the value of human activity, the importance of culture and the meaning of socio-economic life.¹

As early as 1891 Pope Leo XIII in his famous Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* had clearly spoken the task of the Church to commit itself to the socio-economic well-being of the humankind.² Other Encyclicals of the Popes, such as *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octagesimo Aveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) also deal with the same issues. As a result there is in the Catholic Church a very pronounced concern for this world and the realities of this world: "While we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of the foreshadowing of the new age. Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God".³ The same positive approach to the secular world we can see practically in all religions of the world and consequently it is an area in which common theological and religious reflections become indispensable and imperative.

The reasons for this shift of emphasis and change of perspectives are various, but they are also very much inter-related. It seems that the progress in science and technology, through which the humankind came to realize its own vast potentialities but also discovered the wonders of this universe, has very much promoted a positive thinking about the world around and about the planet earth, in particular. Moreover, ours is an age of humanistic thinking, a human-centered thinking in the place of the traditional God-centered thinking. In fact, even theological reflection has become more anthropological in so far as all our language about God is basically a language about

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1. "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), 1965.
 2. The Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was published near fifty years after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* by K. Marx.
 3. Cf. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, art. 39.

the humans. The general feeling is that we do not have to speak about God, if he is not related to the humankind. In philosophical thinking also radical changes have taken place through its passage from *essential* thinking to *existential* thinking, from abstraction to concreteness, and from the world of ideas to the world of action.

In Christian theology the rediscovery of the importance of the Bible for theological reflection, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, after several years of hesitation and suppression, contributed to a great extent towards the affirmation of the temporal order for human life because the Bible is all about what God does in this world for the well-being of the humankind. Here we find a God who does not tolerate any form of oppression and exploitation of his children by the power of the evil. In fact, it is this accent on the Bible that has promoted the contemporary liberation theologies which also emphasize the meaning and relevance of the secular order. As a result of all these the traditional distinction and separation between the sacred and the profane, the natural and the supernatural, the this-worldly and the other-worldly have gradually disappeared and a holistic view of the universe is emerging which has profound consequences for the human life on this earth.

The immediate context of concern for this world, and particularly for this planet earth, however, is the ecological crises humankind is facing either in the form of the pollution of the nature or in the exploitation of the resources of the earth, which together threaten the very existence of life on this earth. Sociologists, politicians and theologians as well as spiritual writers of various religious traditions have taken up this issue in right earnest, and for the past few decades discussions and planning are taking place all over the world, a typical example of which was the Rio Summit of June 1992. For one thing, the humankind has become fully aware of the fact that this style of exploitation of, and violence to the nature cannot go on for long, and until and unless something is done positively the humankind is bound to bear its dire consequences. Hence we see a global awareness of this subject and it is in this context that religions also have come together to defend the rights of our Mother Earth before it is too late. The present study is an attempt to see how the Bible understands the relationship of the humankind to the earth as it unfolds the very origin of both from the creative act of God.

What is the nature of the activity the Bible is proposing for the humankind as it exists and operates on this planet? How is the humankind related to the earth? The starting point of any discussion on these questions is the basic conviction the Bible holds that the whole universe was created by God. The first statement the Bible has to make about the origin of this universe is that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth (Gen 1:1), thereby meaning everything.⁴ It is from this conviction that the Bible proceeds to speak about who the human person is and what his/her task is in this universe and particularly on this earth.

Here a word must be said about the terms used in the Bible to designate the reality of the world. There are three Greek words which are usually translated as 'world': *kosmos*, *aion* and *ktisis*. Whereas *kosmos* means the ordered universe, *aion* means the passing and perishable dimension of the world and *ktisis* means the material creation, which as such has a perishable dimension. Anything created is finite and it has a transitory character. On the one hand, this universe, and especially the material creation, which is the immediate object of our experience, is something fascinating; but on the other hand, the humankind, endowed as it is with a divine dimension, has to affirm and transcend this universe. Consequently it is a question of a right relationship and of a healthy attitude to all created realities. The moment this relationship is distorted, there begins a series of action and reaction, and it can lead to far-reaching consequences for the whole humankind. It is precisely this polarized relationship that we see in the Bible from the first page to the last. The Bible deals with the task of the humankind to establish and execute right relationships with the created universe, and it also explains how this right relationships are often neglected and broken, which resulted in attitudes and events radically destroying the harmony and peace between the humankind and the created universe, especially the material creation.

The Mother Earth as the Home of the Humankind

The two stories about the creation of the world and of the humankind in the first two chapters of Genesis very clearly esta-

4. "Heaven and earth" is a Semitic way of expressing totality and it is to be understood against the background of the Semitic concept of the universe.

blish the fact the humankind is the climax of the creative act of God. Whereas the Priestly tradition sees it in the creation of the humankind (*adam*)⁵ in God's image (*selem*) and likeness (*demut*) as the result of a divine consolation (Gen 1:26-27), the Yahwist tradition understands the creation of the first human male (*adam*) as the result of God making him from the soil (*adama*) and giving him the divine breath to make him a living being (Gen 2:7). In this second narrative the close relationship of the human person to the earth is very clearly articulated. It is to be noted that in both narratives the divine dimension of the human person is emphatically affirmed. In the Priestly narrative the creation of the humankind is presented as the last act of an evolutionary process in God's creative activity, whereas in the Yahwist narrative the creation of man is related to God's plan to have a beautiful garden on the earth. But in both narratives the humankind is created with a task it has to fulfil. In the Priestly narrative this task is to exercise dominion (*rada* in 1:26 and *kabas* in 1:28) over the whole earth and the creatures on it; in the Yahwist narrative it is to cultivate (*'bd*) and keep (*smr*) the garden (Gen 2:15). In both narratives the human task is to continue the divine creative act by being the master and the protector of this earth.

In course of time a Hebrew poet took it as his task to reflect and meditate on this great task entrusted to the humankind and he articulated his feelings of wonder and joy in the following words: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:3-8). The Israelites were admirers of the nature, who were able to see God in everything and praise God for his blessings. The poet who composed Psalm 104 makes it clear how his sense of admiration for the *rhythm* of the nature inspired him

5. It may be noted that in the Priestly tradition the word *adam* means the humankind as such consisting of male and female (Gen 1:27).

to enumerate the wonders of this creation: "You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you wanted the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart" (Ps 104:10-15).

Jesus of Nazareth was one who also had a very positive attitude towards the earth. In fact, he was fascinated by the nature around him. For him the nature was an open book which should invite the human beings to learn from it about God's fatherly and motherly care for his children: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Mt 6:28-29). Many of the parables through which Jesus conveyed his message to his audience, were taken from the imageries of the nature around, from the very reality of the life here on earth. The parables of the seeds (Mt 13:3-9), of the net (Mt 13:47-50), of the mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32), of the weeds (Mt 13:24-30), of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4-7), of the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10) are all clear examples of this earth-bound religious outlook of Jesus of Nazareth.

Though the main mission of Jesus of Nazareth was to preach the arrival of the Kingdom of God with its spiritual dimensions, his commitment was to make the humankind develop a holistic and healthy attitude to the earthly life and through that to have right relationship to God and to the world at large. That is why he told his disciples: "Do not store up treasures for yourselves here on earth" (Mt 6:19). He found fault with the foolishness of the rich man who did not want to part with even the extra of his rich harvest (Lk 12:13-21) and he criticized the cruelty of another rich man who did not have any sympathy for the starving Lazarus at his door (Lk 16:19-31). Jesus considered this earth and its resources as something meant for all the children of God. In the same way as God cares for his children much more than for the sparrows

(Lk 12:6-7), the children themselves are exhorted to take care of their brothers and sisters in their need (Lk 10:30-37). This altruistic approach to human life and the resources of the earth is what characterizes the healthy dimension of human activity on the earth according to the Bible.

In fact, this theology of involvement and commitment to the earth through which the humans care not only for themselves but also for their brothers and sisters is indirectly introduced in the exhortation about rest by the Hebrew writers. In Gen 2:1-2 God is presented as completing his work and resting, giving a model for the humans to imitate. Here rest is not to be seen as a withdrawal from work, but rather as a completion of work, which consists in transcending the work itself. The full meaning of this rest comes to light in the Old Testament in the directive about the seventh year in the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, according to which every seventh year all debts were cancelled and the land had to remain uncultivated (Lev 25:1-7; Dt 15:1-7), thereby making the Israelites realize that the resources of the nature have only a relative value, and that they should learn to transcend the dimensions of the material world to arrive at the true value of life on earth. When Jesus of Nazareth was tempted to change the stone into bread to quench his hunger and was invited to adore the satan in order to possess the whole world, he also reacted saying that "one does not live by bread alone" (Mt 4:4) and that one should serve only God (Mt 4:10).

The Humankind as Estranged from the Mother Earth

The polarized human existence on Mother Earth with its impact on human life and activity as a whole is a phenomenon, of which the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament were fully aware. In fact, they have given a dramatic and symbolic illustration of this reality already at the beginning of their creation narrative. It is the story about the sin of the first human couple living in a garden where they were allowed to enjoy everything in it, except the fruit of a particular tree. The story of the first sin explains how they concentrated their attention exclusively on this tree, of course, as suggested by an external agent, and how they both were found guilty. The outcome of the whole event is painted in very dark colours, how

there arose a principle of separation and hostility between the partners in the action, how the two were driven out from the garden and how God placed cherubim with a flaming sword which turned in all directions, thereby making it clear that they were no more allowed to enter the garden and try again to eat the fruit that would give them immortality (Gen 3:-24).

The tragedy was more. The humans who were taken out from the earth are now to carry on a life full of pain and hardships. The earth is cursed before them, and they will have to work on it to earn their livelihood. The earth will produce weeds and thorns and they will have to eat wild plants. They will have to work hard and sweat to make the soil produce anything. At last they will have to go back to the soil from which they were formed and become once again part of the earth (Gen 3:17-19). Here in this story we have the symbolic presentation of the beginning of disharmony between the earth and the humankind. As it often happens, a principle of separation, once it gets established, keeps on growing and taking more and more hostile proportions. According to the Bible the same thing happened in the early history of the humankind. The first human couple lived together, although a principle of estrangement was already established between them. But in the second generation the two brothers, Cain and Abel, became enemies because of the conflicting understanding of their activity on the earth, and the elder brother kills the younger brother, thus allowing the earth to drink the blood of the brother (Gen 4:10-12). Once again the earth is cursed before the humankind, once again Cain is reminded that the earth will be hostile to him and to his posterity. Cain thus became a homeless wanderer on the earth (Gen 4: 14).

The story of the flood in the Bible is the story of how God punishes the earth because of the increasing sin of the humankind. Water, the very reality which nourished the garden of Eden and made it fertile (Gen 2:6-14), is now seen as destroying the earth and the humankind (Gen 6: 11-7:24). But God preserved the family of Noah to take care of the punished and purified earth and he gave to Noah an eternal sign of love and protection, the rainbow, thereby assuring him that he will not again destroy the earth and its living beings (Gen 9:8-17). Noah was a farmer and he planted a vineyard on the new soil. But the outcome of the story is that the very fruit which

he cultivated made him senseless and that gave an opportunity to one of his sons to express his inner vulgarity and lack of respect for his own father (Gen 9:20-27). This inner corruption of the human heart is presented in the story of the tower of Babel, where we see a group of people struggling to build a tower with its tops reaching upto heaven (Gen 11:1-9). Both as farmers and city-dwellers, the humankind shows its rebellious and perverted nature, and it is with these symbolic stories of the estranged relationship between the earth and the humankind that the common history of the humankind is concluded in the Book of Genesis.

Perspectives on a New Understanding of the Earth

The narrative of the history of Israel is inaugurated with the story of God engaged in making a wandering man, Abraham, possessing a land and becoming settled in it and enjoying it together with his posterity (Gen 12:1-3). The subsequent history of this man and his posterity is characterized by a series of movements on the land they were to possess later through their concerted efforts. When Israel was undergoing oppression and exploitation in a land that was not their own, God promised them that he would bring them out of their slavery and give them a land flowing with milk and honey. The story of the Exodus and the subsequent history of the conquest of Canaan are the descriptions of this committed act of God to help an exploited and oppressed group of people to regain their lost human dignity. However, it is to be observed that the story of the conquest of Canaan is not to be understood as an act of God preferring one group of people to another; rather it is a paradigm story, a story about a model group of oppressed and exploited people who were protected and saved by their God. The ultimate lesson of this story is that God does not tolerate the oppression and exploitation of any group of people anywhere in the world.

This paradigmatic approach to the story of Israel as gifted with a land is made clear in the subsequent history of this people when we are told that the people enjoyed the land and became proud and arrogant and allowed themselves to be estranged from the God who had blessed them. They introduced all forms of corruption into their life, the worst of which was the oppression of the poor, as is illustrated in the prophecies of Amos and Micah. The people in-

roduced the worship of other gods, practised fertility cult, and thereby developed a culture of conquering the earth through their own power. The outcome of this perverted culture was that the neighbouring political powers attacked the land and Israel was driven out from the land. This happened both to the northern kingdom in BC 721 and to the southern kingdom in BC 587. A Hebrew poet describes how the people of Judea expelled from their land by Nebuchadnessar, sat by the rivers of Babylon weeping when they remembered their bygone days of prosperity in their own land (Ps 137:1). After 40 years of captivity and humiliation in a foreign land the people were allowed to return to their homeland, there to see their land and their city devastated and destroyed. It needed much courage for those who returned to build up a city and cultivate a land all in ruins, and some of the post-exilic prophets gave them courage to go ahead and build up their land. It was a desperate attempt and all what they could achieve was nothing in comparison with what they had enjoyed in the past.

The Expectation of a New Earth and the Human Task

The history of Judaism after the return from Babylon was characterized at the same time by realism and expectation, realism in so far as they began to understand the relative importance of this world and expectation in so far as they looked forward to a more prosperous future. There was one line of thinking in Judaism, known as the apocalyptic expectation, which thought of this world as something radically evil, and hence it expected that God would destroy the present world order and establish a new world order, with a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17; 66:22). There was also an expectation that God would send a messenger to execute this divine plan. This is traditionally known as the apocalyptic messianism. Pessimism about the present and optimism about the future is the characteristic note of this thinking and at the threshold of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth this expectation was a very lively one.

Jesus of Nazareth began his ministry announcing the nearness of the kingdom of God. As such, the concept of *kingdom* carries with it the idea of an earthly and geographical reality. But in the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth it was different. He preached the kingdom of God as something that operates in the life of the people,

in their attitudes and inter-personal relationships than in any earthly reality. The earthly reality is not denied; rather it is affirmed and transcended. For Jesus of Nazareth the entire humankind, the earth as the abode of this human community and the entire created universe was the kingdom of God. But the human community is fully responsible to this world and this responsibility it can understand only through a radical conversion of mind and heart whereby it can commit itself to the creation of a new world order. It is to establish this new world order that Jesus of Nazareth lived an authentic life and worked for the total well-being of all, healing the sick, feeding the hungry and doing good to all. His commitment to a new world order invited opposition from his enemies and he had to undergo the fate of anyone totally committed to a cause. But the Gospels explain how Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead and assumed a new body, the spirit-body, which transcends the corruptible dimensions of this earth. The risen Jesus thus stands as the goal and model of a new earth and a new humanity, inviting all to share in his glory.

In his letter to the Romans Paul writes about the material creation as waiting for its eschatological glorification precisely because it is so closely related to the destiny of the humankind (Rom 8:18-23). Both the humankind and the material creation are to benefit by the glorification Jesus of Nazareth has achieved through his resurrection. But according to Paul the present time is characterized by suffering and groaning because it is a time of growing. This groaning dimension has a new meaning in our times, in so far as the humankind is to a great extent responsible for much of the groaning of the creation because of its greed, exploitation and cruelty to the earth. All the same, the Christian belief is that there will come a time when the humankind and the material creation will be totally liberated from their bondage to decay and corruption and obtain their glorious freedom. The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World has articulated this hope in the following words: "We do not know the time for the consummation of the earth and of humanity. Nor we do know how all things will be transformed. As deformed by sin, the shape of this world will pass away. But we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide, and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human

heart. Then, with death overcome, the children of God will be raised up in Christ. What was sown in weakness and corruption will be clothed with incorruptibility".⁶

But this document goes on to explain that such an expectation should not make the Christians uncommitted to this world. It states: "While we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gains the whole world and loses himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. After we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace. On this earth that kingdom is already present in mystery."⁷

The foregoing analysis of the various strands of thought in the Bible shows the complexity of its approach to the reality which we call the earth. On the one hand, the Bible is very optimistic about the created world and it sees the humankind as entrusted with a task of taking care of it. On the other hand, it explains how this task was seldom carried out both in the history of the humankind as a whole and in the history of Israel, specially chosen by God to carry on the mission entrusted to the whole humankind. At the same time, the Bible does not advocate a pessimistic attitude to the world and to the earth. It is all a question of the responsible role the humankind has to play on this earth, a responsibility which has several dimensions, of loving and caring for the nature, of caring for all the human beings, especially the poor and the suffering and of transforming it to make it a

6. *Gaudium et Spes* art. 39.

7. *ibid.*

better abode for all to carry out their human tasks. In conclusion it has to be said that the attitude the Bible recommends towards the earth is one of affirmation, negation and transcendence: affirm the positive values of this great gift of God, deny the same gift because of relative importance in relation to the ultimate destiny of the humankind, and thereby transcend the earth to reach out to the eternal and the absolute, which is God, the goal of our life here on earth.