Religion and environment

The foundation stone of the approach of all Christians to care for the environment is the conviction shared with other Abrahamic religions that the world is God’s creation. This is closely linked with the fact that human beings, with all their activities, are an intrinsic part of this creation. We cannot think of the environment as something which is outside of us. Questions about the environment, its protection and care, are inseparably linked with other complex enquiries, such as our relation to other human beings, to society and to the economy. Care for the environment from the religious perspective is not something added to the basic worldview. It is an integral and essential part of it. This basic recognition has then two far-reaching consequences. The first is that care for the environment is not only an inseparable part of the Christian worldview, but that it indeed contains a dimension which can be described as religious. The other is that the current problems of the environment cannot be solved in isolation. Ecology and anthropology cannot be separated.

Biblical foundations

Biblical understanding of creation is much richer than it is very often thought. It is shaped by an imagery far exceeding the widespread and popular creation story presented by the book of Genesis. The Old Testament offers a rich collection of texts further elaborating the Genesis creation story.¹ Together with the basic features of biblical cosmology, they remind us of the essential parameters of the human relationship with the created and uncreated world. What is very often beyond the horizon of the narrow views limiting creation theology to the words of Genesis, is the New Testament extension of the story, underlining that Jesus Christ is not only ‘the word’ through which the creation exists, but He is also the one who gives to the whole creation its meaning and fulfilment.²

At the centre of the Christian understanding of creation is the unity of the Old and New Testament. The distinctive signs of this teaching can be noted already in the first centuries of Christianity, which are of invaluable importance for us in the modern approach to care for creation.

In acknowledging the role of history and tradition in shaping the Christian understanding of the world and the human relationship to it, at the same time at least two dangers have to be recognised which are revealed in different parts of history. One is the danger of misuse of

¹ See e.g. Psalms 24, 139 and many others, as well as the Prophetic texts, as Is 48:7; 4; 43:19; 45:7; Ez 37: 1-14; etc.
² See in particular texts like: “for in Him [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17); “in the presence of the God … who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17); “by faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Hebr 13:2); “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11); etc.

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theology for unjustified human dominance over the creation, for its exploitation and misuse. The other is the danger of replacing the God of creation by the substitutes. The God of creation has to be and remain the centre and the focal point of all Christian care for the world and creation. This has to be repeated again and again; in particular in a time when environmental destruction has reached such a level that sometimes even good-minded care for creation loses its focus and becomes the centre of religious reverence on its own.

Two great Christian theologians
The greatest theologian of the 7th century, Maximus the Confessor, put forward those highlights of Christian care for environment, which then and now are highly significant. Maximus’ Trinitarian theology is well known, which then has far-reaching consequences on his theology of Creation. Maximus, in line with his predecessors, underlined that God is One, according to the principle of God’s essence. This is a way of expressing God’s ontological unity. At the same time, God is Triune according to the mode of existence. Maximus developed an understanding of creation as being a divine Trinitarian motion toward perfection and fulfilment.

Following this recognition, St. Maximus gave particular attention to the doctrine of reciprocity. Reciprocity is seen as a dynamic exchange between God and humans. God’s incarnation is accompanied by the parallel move of human divinisation. This means that this reciprocity should express itself in action, or rather in the activity of man leading to the salvation. This activity is at the same time not only enacted in creation, but is oriented towards creation. Salvation is a process realised in and through creation. In Maximus’ view, God and human beings are cooperating for the benefit of the whole creation.3

Maximus developed and elaborated an idea of man who was understood as a microcosm. Parallel to that, the world was seen as a makroantropos.4 The point of these two conceptions is not so much the parallel between them. What is more important is the specific role which was given on the basis of these conceptions to human beings. Humans were seen not only in the role and task given to them. The human being is also a mediator between him/herself and the external world, the universe. This task has been refused by humans, who are described as sinners, which has led them to depend on the world rather than mastering it. It is the conviction of Christianity that only through God’s incarnation in Christ can this task or active mediation fully take place.

In the 16th century, there were in particular Reformers who took a new and fresh look at creation and a new relationship between man and nature was put it into opposition to the spiritualising view of the middle ages. From among them, it was Martin Luther, who, in line

4 Macroanthropos (from gr. makro – long, and anthropos – human being) is used as a counter pole to microcosms (micro – small and cosmos – universe). The accept is put on a close interconnection between principles determining existence of the universe and the human being: the human being as determined by the rules valid for the whole universe and the universe determined by the principles guiding existence of the human being.

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Luther underlined human **dependency on creation**. Another important element of the whole teaching is that this dependency is not expressed in an abstract way, but dependency is personal. Luther is very concrete in elaborating this part of his theology. The consequence of this approach is not only that he was able to avoid speaking about it in abstract philosophical categories. He describes God most often as the one whom we meet as a person. Personal dependency and direct relationship between the human being and God leads him to a very specific acknowledgment of creation as a gift. This recognition is particularly important in the modern era, when overemphasised rationality and overstatement of the value of technological progress puts forward human’s individual ability and human power to solve all existing problems by means of logic, human reason and modern technologies. The world as a gift reminds us of the exact opposite - emphasising our dependency, vulnerability and our limitedness.

A very distinct feature of Luther’s theology of creation is a notion of **partnership**. Luther is very clear that there is a substantial difference between the world as it is, as it should be and will be. As he is convinced, theology of creation cannot be complete without the eschatological dimension.\(^5\) Full realisation of a creature created in God’s image can be completed only in future and, as Luther says, in expectation and hope. Until this happens, it is the task of all Christians to fight for what is good and eliminate what is bad. The task of the Christian is to be part of the struggle between the old and new life. Only in new life can we realise full participation with God. The emphases on participation are of substantial importance. It is, however, not only participation of man with God. Luther teaches a new relationship between the human being and nature.

In Luther’s imagination, as elaborated in one of his sermons, creation is introduced as a woman at the moment of giving birth. She would like everything to be finished, but does not know yet what the final result will be. A consciousness is ascribed to creation which goes parallel with human consciousness. That one, as Luther says, which God prepared for his children through the Gospel and through baptism. Neither Gospel and nature, nor human activity and nature can be separated. What is to be noted as well is that the beauty of creation, although achievable, is described as hidden and veiled. Its full dimension can be discovered only in and through faith.

There are many places in Luther’s teaching where he expresses a protest call against the misuse of creation. This is very appealing, in particular today. What is of substantial importance in Luther’s theology of creation, as Gerhard Ebeling reminds us, is the groaning of creation.

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\(^5\) **Eschatology** is the study of the eschaton, the times of the end, or ‘last things’. This is to be understood not only in the perspective of continuing and in one day finalised time sequence. It includes broader perspectives, as being concerned with what are the final and shaping events in history, the ultimate destiny of humanity etc.

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creation in expectation and hope for a new creation. This suffering and persecution is still hidden and unrecognisable. It is in the process of being revealed.\textsuperscript{6}

From all these signs, it is clear that parallelism between man and nature and partnership between them is a line, which brings theologians and Christian thinkers of different provenance close to each other. Following that line, it is of no surprise that these traditional theological resources are carefully reflected and further developed in a creative way in modern theological approaches.

**Christian approach to care for creation**

In all Christian approaches to creation, principal attention is given to the terminology of gift and to the understanding of creation as a gift. For both St. Maximus and Martin Luther, offered above as inspirational examples for modern creation theology, the notion of gift is the spiritual centre of their approach to the theology of creation.

Recognition of creation as a gift comprises an acknowledgement of the wider meaning of creation far exceeding its utilitarian purposes. In recognising the world as creation we recognise that we are a part of God’s plan. This is the confirmation not only of the good meaning of creation as such, but also the fact that the world is worthy of salvation. The world is a place of God’s personal agency and his personal presence in us and among us. Creation is closely linked to the salvation of the human being. Salvation has therefore not runaway into other worlds. Salvation is something that happens here and now, in this time. Human beings have to take part in their salvation.

At the same time, this means that the human approach to the gift of creation cannot be fully expressed by rational means. For the Christian, intelligent, rational action in the world is, as Luther says, an expression of the conviction that what we encounter is a gift, so that we shall only tell the truth about the world as and when we treat the world accordingly.

With the notion of gift, another term is closely linked which shapes the Christian approach to creation in the modern era – the notion of justice. Recognition of creation as a gift calls for a response to the received gift. It is exactly in shaping this response, where justice comes to the fore. Christian action responding to the gift of creation is motivated by the principle of justice. Justice is increasingly recognised as an inseparable dimension of care for creation. In this regard, justice is far more than a legalistic following of the principle of rights. Justice is the recognition of wrongdoing, as well as the recognition of vulnerability and compassion with those who are suffering. It is, however, also an active sharing of available knowledge and resources with those who are in need, particularly with those who have to go through difficulties because of our wrongdoing in the past.

**A new ecumenical approach**


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Care for creation, as it was developed in the early years of Christianity and reinvigorated in modern times, is by its character not only a distinct part of Christian theology. It is equally an ecumenical journey. Speaking about an ecumenical approach to care for creation in our days is not a search for the lowest common denominator among different churches’ traditions. This would be short-sighted ecumenism: ecumenism of self-limitation. What we are looking for is an ecumenical approach in which the scope and the depth of different church traditions would be revealed, appreciated, and further developed in full respect to each other. The theology of creation has a chance to use and develop traditions in a way free from conflict, which do not contradict but supplement each other.

Only equipped with such a background, will the Christian approach be prepared for a meaningful dialogue with politics and with secular approaches to environmental protection, which is a dialogue that is particularly needed in modern society.

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The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is a fellowship of some 120 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus 40 associated organisations. CEC was founded in 1959. With its offices in Geneva, Brussels and Strasbourg works on promotion of dialogue between the churches and European political institutions.

European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) is a platform of European churches for deepening of the dialogue, exchange of experience and joint work in protection of environment among churches in Europe.

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