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# Ecological Sin: Novelty or Necessity?

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“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.”

**Mahatma Gandhi<sup>1</sup>**

Surrounding mountains, high altitude, an active volcano, and a steep drop at the end of a short runway make flying into *La Aurora International Airport* in Guatemala City an interesting experience at any time of the year. Densely constructed barrios on impossibly sheer hillsides interspersed with deep ravines make one seriously ponder whether and where enough level space might realistically be found to land a plane. The familiar thud of rubber on concrete and the roar of engine-assisted brakes effectively answers that query albeit while giving rise to several not unrelated concerns.

Guatemala's geography has frequently influenced its history. Close to two-thirds of the country's total land area is mountainous. The rugged terrain provided refuge that allowed the indigenous peoples to survive the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, while the fertile valleys eventually produced fine coffees and other crops that have dominated the nation's economy ever since. Frequent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and torrential rains have often brought disaster and made building and maintaining roads and railways there very difficult. The dozen or so of us who were guests of CIDSE – an international alliance of Catholic development agencies working together for global justice – got to experience these infrastructural deficits vividly during our weeklong observer mission to this beautiful yet tragic country in June 2014.<sup>2</sup>

While learning of the history of a beautiful country often torn apart by war it was saddening to learn how the country continues to be ravaged by mining and other extractive industries seeking to exploit the country's natural resources for profit. As large multinational corporations seek to expand their mega projects and exploitation of Guatemala's rich mineral deposits, violent evictions of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands become more widespread, with little political will to protect the communities, their way of life and their beautiful homeland. Foreign owned companies

buy up huge tracts of land to undertake mega-projects including hydroelectric dams, petroleum exploitation, mining, and industrial scale agriculture clearly benefiting from lax environmental controls that would rarely be tolerated in their countries of origin.

UN special rapporteur for indigenous rights, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, notes that indigenous groups suffer structural discrimination and exclusion, including a lack of consultation for projects on their land, forced displacement, unfulfilled reparations for a bloody genocidal past, and soaring poverty.<sup>3</sup> Tauli-Corpuz highlights land conflicts and increased forced eviction of indigenous communities as leading problems. She notes how land grabs have multiplied several times in Guatemala as extractive industries, mega-infrastructure developments, and agribusiness plantations exploit traditional indigenous territories.

The rapporteur's observations resonate with religious sister Maudilia López Cardona, who works with the Catholic parish in her western Guatemalan community, San Miguel Ixtahuacán. She has spent the better part of the past two decades resisting one of the world's largest gold mines, the Marlin mine. Owned by Canadian mining giant Goldcorp, the Marlin mine shut down some years ago, but San Miguel continues to suffer the consequences, including heavy metals in the water and residents' blood. "In the end, the [mining] company is a new form of colonization and exclusion," says López Cardona.<sup>4</sup> For her, not taking into account the life and livelihoods of the local indigenous people is undeniably a form of unlawful discrimination because in effect it treats them as second-class citizens. From a purely theological standpoint one might be inclined to add that it is also arguably sinful as would also be the systematic destruction of the environment and with it the degradation of the culture, livelihoods and basic human rights of the Guatemalan indigenous peoples.

The Guatemalan situation is of course but a microcosm of a similar picture of environmental degradation to be found right throughout Central and Latin America and indeed much further afield. Nevertheless, it is a picture with which current pontiff, Pope Francis was intimately acquainted given his years of service to *CELAM* the umbrella group of Latin American Bishops' Conferences. In 2007, while Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio was charged with drafting the concluding document of their 5th General Conference in Aparecida, Brazil.<sup>5</sup> That document noted that:

financial institutions and transnational companies are becoming stronger to the point that local economies are subordinated, especially weakening the local states, which seem ever more powerless to carry out development projects at the service of their populations, especially when it involves long-term investments with no immediate dividends. International extractive industries and agribusiness often do not respect the economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights of the local populations, and do not assume their responsibilities. Preserving nature is very often subordinated to economic development, with damage to biodiversity, exhaustion of water reserves and other natural resources, air pollution, and climate change.<sup>6</sup>

Quoting St. Francis of Assisi in his *Canticle of All Creatures*, The *Aparecida* document affirms: "Our sister, mother earth" is our common home and the place of God's covenant with human beings and with all creation. To disregard the mutual relationships and balance that God himself established among created realities is an offense against

the Creator, an attack on biodiversity and ultimately against life. The missionary disciple to whom God has entrusted creation must contemplate it, care for it, and use it, while always respecting the order given it by the Creator.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of an “ecological offense against the creator” as set out in *Aparecida*, rather begs the question as to whether such destructive behaviour might reasonably be described as sinful. A decade later and Cardinal Bergoglio had become Pope Francis. Whether a new category “Ecological Sin” should be added to the corpus of Church teaching was the question he found himself fielding in the wake of the publication of his 2016 Encyclical on the care for our common home *Laudato Si*.<sup>8</sup> Speaking subsequently at the *20th World Congress of the International Association of Penal Law* in Rome, the Holy Father gave a preliminary response to the media query. “We have to introduce – we are thinking about it – to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* the sin against ecology, the ‘ecological sin’ against our common home, because a duty is at stake.”<sup>9</sup>

How then might one set about defining this category of ecological sin or sins? One of the first to use of the term “ecology” was German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) in his book *General Morphology of Organisms*. Here he defines ecology there as “the science that studies the relationship of living beings with each other and with their environment. For Haeckel ecology therefore studies the very conditions of life itself.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, his use of the word “relationship” indicates insistence on interdependence and the idea that no single being can exist alone.

For his part, Pope Francis see the relationships of humankind to the environment as set within a context of four key human interactions, namely:

- Relationships with other human beings family, fellow citizens, co-workers and worshippers etc.
- The relationship with oneself
- The relationship to nature and the environment.

These three are rooted and draw their meaning in turn from

- The relationship to God

All human beings, according to Francis, have a duty therefore to nurture and nourish each of these sets of relationships. Part of the responsibilities of human beings is thus to maintain the integral balance of interactions in which they were created. They do so by taking care or care-taking (recurring expressions in the encyclical) of each of these key relationships. Ecology is therefore only deemed integral when it embraces all four sets of relationships.<sup>11</sup>

So how exactly might a “sin against ecology” work within a theological framework? Clearly the language has to be framed in a way that illustrates that the ‘sin’ ultimately wounds or disrupts the relationship with God rather than injuring or damaging some inanimate reality. In a sense however, such a line of thought would not be entirely new. Even before the Second Vatican Council church teachings held that when we abuse the natural world or animals or plants, we are thereby offending God their creator, who gave them to humankind to use for the right purposes and in accordance with their nature. Such ‘offenses’ are ultimately against God or against those who have been created in God’s image.

Were the Pontiff to frame “ecological sin” in this light and amend the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* accordingly, it would no doubt stand broadly in line with Catholic

tradition, which has long held that human beings have a moral obligation to preserve the environment as God's good creation. In fact, Francis' predecessor Pope Benedict XVI made a very similar argument in his message for World Day of Peace 2010.<sup>12</sup>

It is of course one thing to argue the case for ecological sin but Francis wants to set his sights much higher. This is why he advocates an 'ecological conversion'. Strictly and theologically speaking, ecological conversion is a call that can only be made to Christians or people of faith, but in the encyclical's second chapter, *The Gospel of Creation*, he suggests they join their efforts to all those "people of good will" to whom in fact his encyclical is also very deliberately addressed. For Francis the entire history of humanity and all human interactions are in fact marred by sin which has ruptured or at any rate disrupted each of the key aforementioned relationships. Whereas in the first and third chapters of the encyclical, the pope emphatically presents the state and causes of contemporary environmental disruption in the second chapter he affirms that it is sin, and therefore the human heart itself, that is at the very centre of the ecological crisis.

The encyclical therefore suggests that Christians should embrace an 'ecological spirituality' arising out of a genuine "ecological conversion". This spirituality in turn would have to encompass all four levels of reconciliation "Any neglect in the charge of cultivating and maintaining an adequate relationship with my neighbour, to whom I have the duty of attention and protection, destroys my inner relationship with myself, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer inhabits the earth, the Bible tells us that all life is in danger."<sup>13</sup>

While it is true then that Pope Francis had as early as 2016 evoked the notion of ecological sin; explaining that a "crime against nature is a crime against ourselves and a sin against God" it was three years later before the term would really enter the mainstream. In late 2019 the *Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region* sought to identify new paths of evangelization and to highlight the vital role the region plays in the health of the planet. Between October 6 and October 27, bishops and representatives from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Venezuela, and Suriname gathered with Pope Francis in Rome.<sup>14</sup> The prelates took up the ecological theme with gusto and called for the rejection of "individualism or indifference that make us look at reality as spectators, as if upon a screen." They advocated an "ecological conversion centred on responsibility and upon an 'integral ecology' that places human dignity, all too often trampled upon, at the very centre and above all other considerations."<sup>15</sup> The reaction of the international media was spontaneous and dramatic "Have they invented a new sin?" was their question as news spread that the *Final Document of the Synod for the Amazon*, approved at the end of October that year, was proposing for the immediate attention of the Church and of the world a thorough consideration of ecological sin. This was provisionally defined "as an action or omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment; a sin against future generations manifested in the acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment, in the transgressions against the principles of interdependence and in the breaking of the networks of solidarity between creatures."<sup>16</sup>

A few weeks after the conclusion of the Synod, on November 15, Pope Francis in his *Address to the participants in the XX World Congress of the International Association of Criminal Law*, and more especially in the section dedicated to the juridical-criminal protection of the environment took up again the notion of ecological conversion and made

it his own.<sup>17</sup> As well as providing a strong echo of the thoughts of his immediate predecessor Benedict XVI, one might also argue that there was an echo in Francis' reflections on ecology of Pope John Paul II's juxtaposition of *Culture of Life* and *Culture of Death*. For John Paul, the world in which we find ourselves is in fact permeated by the call to fullness of life and joy, which in turn expresses what God ultimately desires for all his creatures. There is also for him an opposing dynamic however which give the impression of promising happiness but instead leads ultimately to death. All sin is therefore a deception whereby a choice is made for the dynamic of death instead of the logic of life. In his *1990 World Day of Peace Message*, he had pointed out that "an education in ecological responsibility is urgent," and that "Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith."<sup>18</sup>

Later the *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*, a joint statement signed in 2002 by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Pope John Paul II, affirmed that the degradation of the environment and its natural resources, is not an issue that is "simply economic and technological; it is also moral and spiritual." For this reason, "A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which leads to a change in lifestyle and in unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Only a genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act."<sup>19</sup>

From this perspective, it can be argued that recognizing the existence of ecological sin does not simply entail giving in to some kind of fad or fashion, instead it posits the notion that even in our relationship with the environment we can choose wittingly or unwittingly death rather than life. Francis holds that whilst for many centuries the notion of Christian stewardship of creation was perhaps underplayed, the gravity of the current crisis obliges humankind to open its eyes to the sometimes devastating impact of human behaviour on the environment and the consequences this causes for human life itself: "Environmental degradation and human and ethical degradation are intimately connected".<sup>20</sup> It is in awakening to these realities that we are provided with the basis for a new theological awareness. This in turn has the potential at once to sensitize Christians and indeed all humanity to a crucial area of responsibility, but also to indicate a fresh terrain on which to experience conversion, mercy and salvation.

In his aforementioned speech to the *International Association of Criminal Law*, Francis references the rather striking terminology of "ecocide", in which he includes "the massive contamination of the air, land and water resources, the large-scale destruction of flora and fauna, and any action capable of producing an ecological disaster or destroying an ecosystem ", or again " the loss, damage or destruction of ecosystems of a given territory, so that its enjoyment by the inhabitants is been or may be severely affected". He therefore asks for legal recognition to be given to the category of "crimes against peace", after denouncing the impunity often enjoyed by "the macro-delinquency of large companies and multinationals" which is "at the origin of serious crimes not only against property but also against people and the environment."<sup>21</sup>

While it is true that his encyclical *Laudato Si*, didn't explicitly use the expression ecological sin, it did use of other formulations that are very close and in particular the notion of "sins against creation" such as the destruction of biodiversity, pollution and threats to the integrity of the earth. Recognizing the fundamental contribution of the

patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew in having developed the reflection on the matter, Francis quotes the patriarch's observation, delivered in 1997, that "a crime against nature is a crime against ourselves and a sin against God."<sup>22</sup> Likewise Pope Benedict XVI finds mention and in particular his observation that environmental degradation, like social degradation, is the consequence of the selfish withdrawal of the human being into himself.<sup>23</sup> Benedict had in fact also observed during a meeting with the clergy of the diocese of Bressanone on August 6, 2008 that "The laying waste of creation begins where we no longer recognize any authority above us, but instead see just ourselves."<sup>24</sup>

Three years on, at a briefing in the Holy See Press Office and fielding questions regarding the Synod for the Amazon, Archbishop Pedro Brito Guimarães of Palmas, Brazil highlighted some challenges faced in in Brazil's youngest state. One and a half million people live there, raising nine million head of cattle. The animals, observed the archbishop, often enjoy better healthcare than the people. That is because their meat is exported to countries overseas. The primary animal feed in the region is soybean meal, but overplanting has had a negative impact on the earth. The land is eroded, while pesticides and chemicals used to grow the soy have polluted the rivers. Cattle raising also requires a lot of water, and this too risks destroying natural resources. But Guimarães also spoke of his conviction that "a different world is possible". Unless we take care of nature however, "we compromise the preconditions for our lives", he said. While we profess in the Creed that we believe in God, "the Creator of Heaven and Earth", we continue to sin against that very creation without ever stopping to question why. We need to start thinking therefore about a simpler, more essential, lifestyle, he suggested. "We are not owners of Nature only her stewards; we have no other planet where we can live," he concluded, so we should take better care of this one.<sup>25</sup>

Such is essentially the dominant line for thought emerging from the *Synod on the Amazon*, which traced responsibility for the environmental degradation of Amazonia, violations of human dignity, violence against and disintegration of many communities back to the "economic and political interests of dominant sectors, with the complicity of some rulers and indigenous leaders."<sup>26</sup> There is here a strong echo of *Laudato Si'* which had reviewed of the main ecological problems of the contemporary world (pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, water issues, etc.) and concluded by denouncing the weaknesses of politics and the fact that "the economic powers continue to justify the current world system, in which speculation and a search for financial income prevail without reference to particular contexts and the effects on human dignity and the environment."<sup>27</sup>

However, it is in the final document of the *Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region* that we get a focused definition of what exactly constitutes ecological sin:

We propose to define ecological sin as an action or omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment. It is sin against future generations, and it is committed in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment. These are transgressions against the principles of interdependence, and they destroy networks of solidarity among creatures and violate the virtue of justice.<sup>28</sup>

In effect, this means that even small acts like littering and wasteful consumerism as well as more serious issues such as the stripping of woodland and forests or illegal waste disposal into rivers and lakes could potentially be classified as sinful. It also calls

into question the indirect consequences of current consumerist trends such as 'in built obsolescence', which quite evidently have a profoundly deleterious impact on the environment. "Ecological harms are not something that happens to our environment, 'out there,' as if it is separate from human existence," said Celia Deane-Drummond, director of the *Laudato Si' Research Institute* at Oxford University's Campion Hall.<sup>29</sup> Rather, they exist within situations of injustice. In similar vein, Megan Clark, a moral theologian at St. John's University, New York, says calling environmental destruction a sin "reminds us that God is involved." So "talking about ecological sin makes sure that we keep front and centre that it is isn't just that we may be destroying or harming the natural world," she said "but the fact that this breaks our relationship with God." Describing this as ecological sin, Clark added, "Is a way of refocusing that ultimately the natural world does not belong to us but belongs to the Creator."<sup>30</sup>

All this being said reaction to Pope Francis' announcement that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* could be updated to include a definition of "ecological sin" wasn't by any means universally positive. Catholic media reports ranged from praise for how seriously the church was taking the obligation to care for creation to cynicism or even outrage over the church's involvement in what many considered to be a highly politicized issue. "To 'create a sin is absurd," one person tweeted. Another tweet argued that "harming people is a sin but not 'harming the common home' as if the environment were a being." If the wording of the catechism change "is vague or broad," the tweet continued, it will do nothing "except foster politicized interpretations." Some prelates too voiced their disagreement and dismay at the new terminology. Warning the faithful about the recent calls for ecological conversion one senior prelate warned of a stalking horse for an "insidious" agenda of idolatry and one-world government. "With regard to 'ecological conversion,' what I see behind this is a push for worship of 'Mother Earth,'" said Cardinal Raymond Burke in a wide-ranging interview with *The Wanderer*.<sup>31</sup> Burke affirmed that "ecological conversion" was also being used as "an argument for a one-world government." He continued, "This is a masonic idea, an idea of completely secularized people who no longer recognize that the governance of the world is in the hands of God, who entrusts it to individual governments, nations, and groupings of people according to nature itself." Referencing the Old Testament, he pointed out that "The idea of a one-world government is fundamentally the same phenomenon that was displayed by the builders in the biblical episode of the *Tower of Babel* who presumed to exercise the power of God on earth to unite heaven with earth, which is simply incorrect." He added "What we truly need is a religious conversion, in other words, a strong teaching and practice of faith in God and obedience to the order with which He has created us." Calling "ecological conversion" a "very insidious" phrase that is being used to "promote a certain agenda which has nothing to do with our Catholic faith;" Cardinal Burke affirmed that as far as the environment and "ecological conversion" goes, the Church has always taught respect for nature. This is why it has taught that man is the steward of God's creation and that he will have to render an account of the creation for which he has been entrusted. God created man in His own image and likeness that is with intelligence and free will, precisely for the mission of stewardship of the earth. And this is what should be taught to people, not a so-called ecological conversion.<sup>32</sup>

In light of such reactions it is perhaps unsurprising that the Amazonian synod should call on the church to "deepen its theology" in a way that would help people

recognize sins against our common home. There was already of course ample evidence that such a theology was being developed at some length within other Christian traditions. According to Howard A. Snyder, writing from an evangelical worldview, at the root of ecological harm is neglect of the biblical doctrine of creation. He points out that biblical theology begins with creation. Human beings are created in the image of God and placed in an environment which itself reflects God's nature. Scripture thus consistently grounds God's creative work through Jesus Christ by the Spirit in both creation and redemption. According to St Paul in his Letter to the Colossians, Jesus Christ is both "the firstborn of all creation" and "the firstborn from the dead". This affirmation duly unites creation and redemption.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly for Snyder, the Book of Revelation, shows how God is praised in hymns celebrating both creation and redemption through the blood of Christ. Likewise in the Book of Exodus, the Sabbath, so full of eschatological portent, is grounded both in creation and redemption from Egyptian slavery. Scripture frequently and consistently holds together the themes of creation and redemption.

In turn, the biblical doctrine of redemption through the cross presupposes the doctrine of creation. Redemption can never be understood in a fully biblical way unless the full story of creation, and not just human creation, is kept in view. As the psalmist put it "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Caring for and protecting the world God has made is thus an essential part of Christian worship and service. We steward creation for God's sake. Indeed, we should respect creation as if our life depended on it, because in fact ultimately it does. Scripture is thus the story of God's people serving God in God's own land. If and when God's people are faithful to their duties the land itself prospers. Conversely, if the land suffers, all suffer. This is a repeated theme in much of Old Testament literature whether within the law, the prophets, or the wisdom literature. It comes to particular focus in the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus.<sup>34</sup>

The key fact here is interdependence. If Christians truly care about others, they will care for the land and air and multiplied species on which human well-being depends. They are obliged to care for the created order because it has its own God-given right to exist and flourish, independently of its relationship to humankind. The world after all is God's handiwork. God created the universe for purposes, not all of which are yet known to us. We need, therefore, a certain eschatological humility and reserve. As creatures, human beings are called to honour God's creative work and to fulfil their responsibilities as stewards of his handiwork. Since all God's creatures reflect God's glory and have a place in God's plan, all are part of legitimate Christian concern. If God cares for and about the creatures, so should we. In this theological perspective, Jesus came to save not only humanity, but the whole of creation. Humanity and the earth are thereby inextricably bound together and we must therefore care for our natural surroundings.

Similarly, just as the *Fall* (the first sin of Adam and Eve) resulted in the degradation of the earth so too redemption results in the restoration of the earth. Hence there is an ethical imperative to proclaim the gospel to all of creation. If Jesus on the cross redeems the whole of creation then the cross has global and universal meaning and since the cross lies at the heart of Christianity it follows that it must be central to a Christian environmental ethic.

There are too for some evangelical theologians, particularly in the Pauline passages, a key ecological implication of the cross itself: namely the affirmation that the earth is the Lord's. The work that Jesus began in redemption on the cross, he will finish at the *parousia* (second coming). The earth is therefore somehow itself caught up in redemption, and so it too will be necessarily involved in the final consummation. It is clear in fact that from a biblical perspective, the earth is never simply seen as an incidental construct or as mere raw material, it is instead the privileged locus of God's redemptive action, and as such it will somehow also be ultimately renewed: redemption thus includes some manner of transformation of creation itself. From an evangelical standpoint then, "ecological sin" may be the result of a skewing and misinterpretation of creation theology. It essentially consists in a disturbance of our relationship with the rest of created reality and may therefore be described as disobedience to the great divine commission that humankind should steward creation.

Other theologians from various traditions have also been preparing the ground for the last half century or so. As early as the late sixties, the relationship of theology to the modern ecological crisis became an intense issue of debate. The publication in 1967 of the article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", by Lynn White Jr., Professor of History at the University of California at Los Angeles was seminal. In this work, White put forward a theory that the Christian model of human dominion over nature has led to environmental devastation, thus theologians and all people of faith must hear and heed what he dubbed "The Ecological Complaint".<sup>35</sup> Similarly in 1973, Jack Bartlett Rogers, a Presbyterian theologian, published an article in which he surveyed the published studies of approximately twelve theologians which had appeared since White's article. For Rogers, these documented the search for "an appropriate theological model" which could adequately assesses the biblical data regarding the relationship between God, humans, and nature.<sup>36</sup> Much subsequent development of what might now be referred to as "eco-theology" as a theological discourse has effectively been a response to what Professor White's "ecological complaint". Put simply, the ecological complaint posits that Christians actually helped bring about the current global environmental crisis by misinterpreting how humankind transcends nature. Proponents of this perspective essentially claim that Christianity promotes the idea of human dominion rather than stewardship over nature, thus legitimising the treatment of nature itself as a tool to be used and exploited for our survival and prosperity.

Yet recent theological enquiry has equally recognised that Christianity has also been the source of many positive values towards the environment, and that there have been many voices within the Christian tradition whose vision embraced the wellbeing of the earth and all creatures. While Francis of Assisi is one of the more obvious influences on Christian eco-theology, there are many theologians and teachers, such as Isaac of Nineveh and Seraphim of Sarov, whose work has had profound implications for Christian thinkers. Many of these are less well known in the West because their primary influence has been on the Orthodox Church rather than within the Roman Catholic or Reformed Church traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Christian eco-theology has likewise drawn on the writings of such authors as Jesuit priest and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and Passionist priest and historian Thomas Berry. It is well represented in Protestantism by John B. Cobb, Jr., Jürgen Moltmann, and Michael Dowd; in ecofeminism

by feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether, Catherine Keller, and Sallie McFague; Melanie Harris and Karen Baker-Fletcher; in liberation theology by Leonardo Boff; in mainstream Catholicism by John F. Haught and Pope Francis; and in Orthodoxy thought by Elizabeth Theokritoff and George Nalunnakkal (currently Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilose of the Jacobite Syrian Christian Church).<sup>38</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber, both Jewish philosophers, have also left their mark on Christian eco-theology, and provide significant inspiration for Jewish eco-theology now echoed in David Mevorach Seidenberg's work on Kabbalah and ecology.<sup>39</sup>

The message emerging therefore from recent synodal deliberations, building on decades of theological discourse, is but the latest voice therefore in a readily discernible trend with a common message that is becoming ever clearer: any wanton degradation of the natural environment is a wrong perpetrated against humanity itself, against ourselves and against God. This is on the one hand, because of the damage done to life as a whole and the risk to fellow human beings and on the other, because it reflects an extraordinary ethical disconnect; a disengagement with the environment that not only surrounds us, but also forms us and gives us life.

With this realization comes a further key issue namely the personal dimension of ecological harm. Each human being makes choices that impact our common home, and each is therefore called to take stock. Believers in turn, are called in virtue of their faith to come to an awareness of their impact the planet. The initiative for ecological conversion therefore is born within the individual moral conscience. While it is clearly not possible for any one individual to resolve all of the issues threatening our common home; each person nonetheless has an individual moral responsibility to initiate a process of awareness and personal accountability that is capable of leading to a more coherent and integral life respectful of the created environment. Given the intricate web of relationships in which human life is constituted, it also behoves people of faith to offer an inspiring witness to others as to how to steward rather than to exploit their natural habitat.

Pope Francis, for his part, is clear that the recent synodal outcome is all of a piece with a rich vein of social doctrine that has emerged over the last century. Taking into account the radical interconnectedness of all creation as well as the intrinsic value of each creature, Francis' concept of integral ecology is seen as a key horizon of "integral human development" first outlined by another of his predecessors Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, 1967) and encapsulated in the invitation to move from "what is less human to what is more human."<sup>40</sup> In both texts, the virtue of humility grounds a Christian humanist vision of humankind that embraces personal conversion in tandem with structural transformation. Although Paul VI's emphasis on human interdependence and the common good did not yet include language about the rest of creation he nonetheless took the signs of his times as indications of a deeper moral challenge at the heart of a misguided understanding of development that emphasized material consumption and continuous growth at the expense of the transcendent dimension of human dignity. His vision of integral human development calling for structural transformation guided by the integrity of creation as belonging to God, in which human beings are called to cooperate was, it may be argued, a necessary forerunner to Francis' concept of integral ecology.<sup>41</sup>

The argument for a spirituality of ecological conversion nourished by contemplative awareness inspires the vision set forth *Laudato Si'*: "An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found, uncovered.'" At stake is the very survival of the earth itself, and at issue is human hubris. "Once we lose our humility, and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment."<sup>42</sup> The end result of an unbridled human desire to possess natural and artificial resources at any cost is ultimately the degradation of authentic human identity and human dignity. We thus become possessed by the very goods we crave. Created for relationship, humans express their dignity most fully by honouring the intrinsic value of every creature and of all of creation. Relationality or relatedness, rooted ultimately in Trinitarian communion, reminds humankind that all creation is oriented toward God. It proposes integral ecology as an instrument of love and respect for all and for creation.

In his most recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti (On Fraternity and Social Friendship)* Pope Francis again seizes the opportunity to remind us that all human beings share a common earthly home and therefore have to find a way to live as one family. He proposes concrete actions to renew the world and to overcome the ills generated by the *Covid-19* pandemic, which in turn engendered health, economic, social, anthropological and political crises.<sup>43</sup>

This then is the theological foundation from which the notion of ecological sin will undoubtedly emerge if it is ever to go mainstream and gain acceptance as an integral part of Church teaching. It may well be argued in some quarters of course that the entire debate is somewhat arcane and of dubious worth in a world that is increasingly inured to the notion of sin. No doubt there is merit in such reasoning. Still, the fact remains that those actions and the inaction which are harmful to our environment and our planet do have their ultimate origin in personal decision making and in individual moral consciences whether in the boardroom of a mining company in Guatemala or more mundanely, in the choices people make as individuals in their everyday consumer spend. Such decisions will ultimately decide whether or not our beautiful planet continues to thrive and nurture future generations of human beings.

There is an urgent and immediate challenge therefore to raise awareness around the interconnectedness of the vital ecological relationships which all human beings enjoy. In the response to this challenge, the action or inaction of people of faith has unquestionably a very significant role to play. In consequence, the development of the notion of ecological conversion and by extension of ecological sin is no mere novelty; it is rather a necessary and vital contribution to the future of humankind.

*Hugh Connolly, Paris.*

*October 2020*

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Carrión, C. *Report on the CIDSE bishops' tour in Guatemala CIDSE*, (Brussels: CIDSE, 2014).

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