

DISCUSSION
**RELIGION &
ENVIRONMENT**

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TIME TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT SAVING THE ENVIRONMENT BUT WHERE ARE THE RELIGIONS?

by

FRANZ MAGNIS-SUSENO

INTRODUCTION

In connection with an UN Conference on climate some years ago in Berlin the German weekly *Die Zeit* ran caricature on its front page showing a lesson in geography in the year 2095: a teacher in front of a big map of the world which showed some very big islands where now are our continents, telling his students: "In former times the poles were covered with thick slabs of ice." AT about the same time a huge chunk of ice, two thirds of the size of the island of Madura, broke off from the Larsen Ice Shelf in the Antarctic. It was, then, discovered that "for the first time in recorded history you could circumnavigate Ross Island", an Island up to then connected with the Antarctic Continent by the Larsen Ice Shelf [*Time Magazine*, 20-3-1995]. Thus, the ice of the Antarctic is melting. If - what is most improbable - all of its ice would melt away, sea levels

would rise about 65 meters and Bogor would become a sea-side resort.

I suppose that in this circle of illustrious people there is no need to point out the magnitude and urgency of the environmental question. The disturbing thing is that everybody, now, seems convinced that something must be done, but nothing is, in fact, done.

This holds true also for religions, I would say, for all the major religions. Eventually religions usually catch on to very vital questions of humankind even if they are not directly of a religious nature but usually is later than sooner. In this paper¹ I want to vent two feelings. First, that religions - and as a Christian and Catholic I pull first the noses of the Christian communities - have a heavy responsibility, and secondly, that they could, in fact, do something about the deteriorating environment. But no miracle cures are offered.

In the meantime, the destruction of the natural environment goes on almost unabated - after more than 20 years of ongoing critique. Destruction of the atmosphere, deforestation with accompanying loss of vital, irreplaceable genetic heritage, desertification, the poisoning of surface and underground water, immunization of plagues, damage to human genes, spreading of radioactive pollution and manipulation of

genetic heritage: all these and other menaces to human and non-human life are going on an ever-growing scale.

It might even be true that, as Gregory Fuller writes, our environment is already beyond savings. Fuller shows with an impressing amount of data that mankind have already crossed the point of no return. He gives the human species not more than 100 to 200 years (200 years if all measures considered now are in fact taken). According to Fuller, the human species is already beyond saving.²

Whatever the force of Fuller's argument, I am not yet ready to surrender. I still believe that we should put into high gear the campaign for preserving the natural environment, precisely to disprove Fuller's prophecy. But time is pressing, and it might be running out. For twenty years a growing circle of concerned people have agreed that something must be done - but, in fact, almost nothing has yet been done! This must change, or the grandchildren of your grandchildren will in fact be the last generation of human beings born on this earth, as Fuller writes.

What has religion to do with saving the environment? Doesn't religion's competence lie in the other world? But of course, no! The point of all religions - sometimes forgotten in a secularistic environment - is life on this earth. Life in the

other world is no longer our responsibility. But God has placed us on earth and given us some rudimentary means of deliberating and doing things to do something here, in this world. Religion shows people how we should live so that our lives are really a success. And our lives can only be a success if they take their orientation from their Maker. Because how could our life stories be a success, or: how could we ever reach real happiness, if our lives were not geared to the One who thought of us before we ever existed, made us, and, through religion, extends guidance to us.

Thus religion is very much concerned with this world, with how we should live in it, what our real responsibilities are, how we could help each other to enjoy peace and happiness.

In other words, the power of the religions to motivate is enormous. Even in the more secularized West, attitudes to social questions taken officially by religions or Churches still get an enormous boost. This is still much more valid in Asia, a continent that is deeply religious. All the great religions come from Asia. Thus, if we want to mobilize public awareness for the saving of the environment, we must engage the religions. Or better, we should wake them up to their responsibilities. This is true especially regarding those having authority in their respective religion.

In this paper I want first to point out some main factors that brought humankind into its present predicament; this is to understand which attitudes and structures we must change if we want to reverse the deadly trend. Then I question the traditional attitude of religions and ask what religions could contribute to the development of environmental awareness; I shall, as I said, focus especially on Christian attitudes. In the last part I want to make a point, namely that a top-down approach will not be sufficient.

I. PATTERNS OF DESTRUCTION

The situation we find ourselves in is a strange one: Nothing less than the very existence of humankind is at stake because of its way of treating nature. How did this situation come about?

1. LONG IN THE MAKING

We should avoid too simple answers. The problem has been long in the making, and all the great cultures are involved. More than two thousand years ago the Greeks deforested their country. In the 15th and 16th century the deforestation of Italy and Spain took place. Persian mountains and the Atlas in the Maghrib once were covered by woods. Iraq was once a flourishing agricultural center, but since about six

hundred years great parts of it have become desert. The cutting down of vital forests by villagers continues in the Himalayas and other places with terrible consequences of erosion, flooding etc.

Ordinary people have, except for those relatively small groups living according to strict primordial traditions, been negligent of their environment. They easily cut down trees and throw away what they need no longer. Students that may voice stringent criticism of polluting companies still throw away the plastic wrappings of their instant noodles while climbing mountains and, at the top, cut down the edelweiss-flower as a souvenir. There is, yet not much spontaneous feeling for an obligation to keep natural environments intact.

2. THE MODERN IDEOLOGY OF GROWTH

Thus, traditionally, there was no "natural" or emotional resistance to a careless attitude to nature. And only after the damage was already done, did realization of the environmental problem dawn upon ever greater parts of humankind.

That thousands of years of carelessness towards nature finally culminated in our situation today was, of course, the consequence of a specific historical development, the growth and development of modern, technique-based economics.

Modern capitalism, making capital growth its goal in place of the fulfillment of needs, institutionalized growth as essential condition for economic health. Pure economic efficiency became the fundamental attitude. Thus, nature was regarded merely as a source of material to be used and as far as not integrated into the final product, discarded, all at minimal costs. Thus, what we could call the technocratic mentality was born: take what you need and throw away what you don't need any more. Within the capitalist framework, the integrity of natural systems makes production more expensive.

A fact is worth contemplating: That the most terrible environmental damage has not been done in capitalist, but in socialist, especially communist countries. The environmental destruction left behind in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, in the territory of the former Soviet Union and, I am afraid, probably also in countries like China and North Korea that have not yet opened up to inspection, is beyond imagination. Why that? Because on the one hand socialism still single-eyed pursued a policy of economic growth, on the other hand it could do this under totalitarian conditions where neither a suffering local population nor the media or environmental groups were allowed to raise their voices. Socialist countries just did produce without caring. Only now does it dawn on their respective population what terrible price they will have to pay for past neglect.

I shall return to this obvious connection between authoritarian government and environmental irresponsibility. For the moment, let me just sum up that modern, growth-oriented economies have not yet developed a conception of sustainable growth, let alone of productive equilibrium. Thus, the destruction of our natural environment is the consequence both indifference of people in general, and of the ideology of growth firmly installed in modern economic and political power structures.

II. THE REACTION OF THE RELIGIONS

01. THE "WE-TOO" STAGE

How did religions the world overreact to the ecological crisis? We should start from the not so impressive fact that ecological ethics did not develop inside but outside, or better: beside the great religions. True, there were small religiously motivated groups in the West that from the beginning became part of the environmental movement. But these groups were at the margins of their religious main streams, they were outsiders, often regarded as dangerous leftists by their own congregations; they were in no way representative of their communities. Nevertheless, it was these groups that, in fact, spearheaded a slowly growing awareness within the great religions that the ecological crisis was a challenge to religion too.

But it took the great religions an awful lot of time to get hooked - if they are now. Up to now, one does not get the feeling that the concern for the environment already has to the heart of many religious communities and their leaders. They get extremely excited when some small part of their religious laws is challenged, but it is only a few people that bother by the terrible fact that we are in the process of destroying our planet.

Now, of course, environmental concern has become a public issue in a growing number of countries the world over. The voicing of environmental concern has, at least, become a ritual. Religions, too, now use to stress that "we too" very much support environmental endeavors, that "in our religion" we can find all kinds of examples and teachings that show how important responsibility for the environment is and always has been, etc. etc. But religions are still far from being a strong supporting force of environmental concern. They are still in the "we too"- stage of involvement.

2. CHRISTIANITY

This was certainly true of Christianity in general. But in the last ten years clearly have seen a change of attitude. Concern for the environment is now seen as an essential part of the message of the Gospel at the end of the 20th century. Theological

literature on environmental questions is growing and there is also a growing concern voiced in parishes and communities.

Central in Christian [and Jewish] theology of the environment is a deepening understanding of God's command to man and woman to rule over the creatures of the world. The central text can be found in the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis chapter 1 verse 28: *"Grow and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth."*

There is a lively discussion going on whether this passage of Holy Scripture has been misunderstood by modern Western man as license to use [and abuse] nature to satisfy his desires. There is a theological consensus that such an interpretation misses the point in a meaningful way. What God meant to say was that man should develop and cultivate nature. The picture of paradise as a garden, the garden of Eden, underlines this interpretation. Nature is like a garden: The gardener develops and tends it, so that it becomes beautiful and healthy. Thus, God's commands make humankind responsible for nature: for plants and animals. People may use nature to fulfill their needs, but like a good shepherd tends his or her flock. Thus, humanity as custodian and shepherd of nature. In this,

man represents God because he and she is created according to God's image.

Thus, although man may use nature, as nature uses itself too, every creature has a value in itself. Animals and plants are not just for man, but they are valuable in themselves. Man may use them insofar as he and she belong to nature and live from nature. But man may not abuse them.

Thus, the Christian theological approach to the question of natural environment could be described as anthropological and theocentric in the same time, as theocentric ally orientated anthropology.³ Anthropocentric because the dominant position of man as God's representative on earth, but theocentric ally orientated, because man owns his and her position totally to God's creative will. Thus, Christian theology does not follow the romantic and naturalistic tendencies of some philosophers that want to blur the difference between human beings, animals and plants. Environmental ethics would be very frail indeed if they were based on such rubber concepts as "harmony" or "partnership with nature". Mankind belongs to nature, but it is never only nature. We must learn a responsible attitude to nature precisely because nature, in a certain sense, has been entrusted to man.

This idea of human being responsible for the integrity of nature should be reinforced by a theology of Incarnation. It is the cornerstone of Christian belief that God entered history and humanity through his Son Jesus. Our world, earth, our body, and the whole of nature of which we are an inseparable part is "assumed" by the Word. A respectful, cheerful outlook to the whole of nature would be an immediate implication of this central Christian belief. A theology of the cosmic Christ in the light of Kolosse 1 if you like on the lines of Teilhard the Chardin of other perspectives yet for meditation.

This biblically based responsibility for nature is complemented by the old classical Christian doctrine of self-moderation. This doctrine has an incredibly ancient tradition in Christian teaching, going back all the way to the New Testament. It says that Christians should be content with what is necessary to live without want. They should renounce the worldly desire of always wanting more, which has led to the crazes of modern times consumerism. Christians should be conscious that they are not going to live for ever in this world, that the real goal of their lives is God, thus they should travel through this world like pilgrims, with light luggage [as the Javanese say, just stopping at a shop for a cup of coffee]. This attitude of holding back, of been content with what is really needed, is a necessary condition for developing a caring, cultivating, cheerful outlook towards nature.

There is another extremely important train of thought, namely that today's mankind is responsible for future generations. As all men and women that have families need not be reminded that they should make sure as far as they can, that their children and children's children find the same, or better conditions of life, mankind as a whole too is responsible for the living conditions of future generations.

3. RECENT CATHOLIC TEACHING

Allow me to enter a bit into Catholic teaching. The first pope noticing the challenges of the environmental problem was *Pope Paul VI* 25 years ago. In his letter "*Octogesima Adveniens*" [1971] he criticized the thoughtless exploitation of nature [nr. 21]. He foresees the possibility that mankind's attitude could, "in a short time, lead to living conditions that would be intolerable".

Pope Johannes Paul II drew attention to the ecological problem in his encyclic on development [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 1987, nr. 34] and in his encyclic *Centesimus Annus* of 1991 [nr. 37]. In the latter, he speaks about "an anthropological error" which lies "at the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment": "Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on

God's prior and original gift of the things that are... Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature ..."

Thus, Christian faith should not only make men and women conscious of their responsibility for nature, it should also make them understand that, what they are and what they are able to do, they have received from their Creator.

4. TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS AND ENVIRONMENT

Sometimes it is said that traditional religions have, for many centuries, fostered attitudes towards nature that have safeguarded its integrity. By traditional religions I mean original, indigenous religions. It is a characteristic of these religions that they encompass the whole of everyday life, thus everything the community and its members do can only be understood within the framework of their religion.

As regards the salvation of the environment, two things are relevant. Firstly, most of the indigenous people have developed a way of living, working, and communicating with nature that makes sure that the environment is not damaged. Thus, they have developed exemplary ways of cultivating

nature that on the one hand fulfill their needs, on the other hand leave the ecosystems intact.

But, secondly, it seems doubtful that we will "learn" much from them. Why? Because, on the one hand, precisely because of the total way of seeing daily life as an integrated whole, it seems to be extremely difficult to isolate their regard for the environment and save it into an otherwise already broken-down modernized way of life. On the other hand, the collusion of "national interest" in exploitation of natural riches with economic capitalistic interests puts indigenous rights and ways of life into an extremely weak position.

If we want to look for a way out, I suggest that it does not lie in making some indigenous cultures become some kind of reservations or cultural safari parks, but involving indigenous people in the decision making processes and increasing their bargaining power by giving them opportunity for better education, political representation also. In short, not paternalism, but more democratization seems to me to be the right thing to do.

III. WHAT CAN, WHAT SHOULD RELIGIONS DO?

What can religions do? Two things seem indicated. The first one regards the endeavors to develop environmental aware-

ness among the people; here religions could play a very important part. The second one regards structures.

1. A CHANGE OF ATTITUDES

We need a change of attitude of the whole population. From an attitude of indifference to a deeply felt concern for the safeguarding of the natural environment. It seems clear to me that religions, better, religious leaders could and should play a decisive part in bringing about this change. They should be concerned, both because of concern for their communities and, as have shown for the Christian faith, directly because of their sense of mission: God wants them to stop the destruction of nature. They should realize that this destruction is sin in the real sense of the word.

1. We should internalize a revulsion to all kinds of living and do that pollutes, paralyses, destroys, poisons, or kills the natural environment.
2. We should develop a feeling of responsibility for the cleanliness of our local environment; we do not throw plastics away; we leave the place where we were at least as clean as it was before we arrived.
3. In general, the principle of "who pollutes pays" should be enforced without exception.

4. It should be made clear, by demanding payment, that there are no free goods floating about: air, water, the sea, and other "free" goods of this planet are limited and whoever uses them up should pay for it.
5. We should develop a principle of proportionality: although no development can leave the natural environment intact, the use or necessity of the development project should be proportional to the damage it does to the environment.
6. We should learn to respect nature and to feel responsible for the intactness of the biosphere; although according to most religions [and according to my own conviction] animals and plants may be used for consumption by man, we should never look at them just as instruments for the satisfaction of our needs; the creatures of nature have their own value.
7. We must develop a feeling of solidarity with future generations; we are under duty to leave them an environment that is no less healthy, beautiful, and intact than the environment we inherited from former generations.

I believe that religions should take a leading part in fostering such attitudes in the minds and hearts of their believers. This means first a change of attitude by the religious leaders themselves. Helped by their theologians they should develop a wider awareness of what it means to serve the Lord. They

should feel responsible not only for ritual questions and for morals in a narrow, traditional understanding, but they would be aware that God holds them responsible for His creation. Thus, environmental ethics should become part of their message.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND DEMOCRACY

Although a change in personal attitudes is one of the conditions for saving the natural environment, it is not enough. There are structural conditions, conditions in terms of power structures.

I have already pointed out that the most terrible destruction of natural environment occurred under communist regimes. Why was that? Was it because capitalism takes a more responsible attitude? To put this question is to answer it, of course in the negative.

But something is true, indeed. As narrowly economic minded capitalism may be, capitalism, although not responsible, is nevertheless an extremely responsive economical system. The reason for this can be easily understood. Capitalism, in its pure form, is completely orientated to, and dependent on the market. What is the market? The market is not only the place where commodities are sold and bought. The market is,

in fact, everything that must be considered to obtain a profit. And that meant that capitalism would also take the environment into account if, f.i. by social pressure, negligence of the environment could become expensive.

In other words, capitalism was not as destructive as socialism has something to do with democracy. Capitalistic enterprises cannot afford to disregard any pressure. Therefore, as pressure from environmental groups mounted and political parties began to respond, capitalism was forced to respond too.

But this did not happen in communist countries. In communist countries factories, universities, schools, and the people had to accept silently what was planned from high above. Grassroots movements, f.i. environmentalism, were just not tolerated. And therefore, there were no forces countering the relentless pressure in communist regimes to force economic growth, a pressure that grew with the growing inefficiency of communist economies.

But we need not go to former communist countries. In many authoritarian states we see the same picture. There might exist a ministry for the environment, the minister might even be an honest person, but private industry can go on polluting the environment without having to bother about

popular reactions because they are protected by the local, or even central administration. Opposition by local communities is disregarded and sometimes ruthlessly oppressed.

Thus, one decisive element in developing effective environmental attitudes is democratization in the sense that people are allowed to voice their concern and the political class cannot afford to neglect it.

Here, too, the attitude of religious leaders can make a decisive difference. How is their attitude towards democracy? Both because of democracy itself and because democracy is a potent force supportive of measures to save the natural environment.

CONCLUSION

Here I want to close. It seems clear to me that an awaking of the religions to their responsibility towards the salvation of the natural environment would be a particularly principal factor in developing environmental awareness in society. Together with ongoing democratization such awareness could build up ever more pressure that would force existing powers to begin to really do something about saving the environment.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is an updated version of a speech I gave at a workshop on Traditional Belief and Religious Approaches to Environmental Preservation, organized by EARTH WIRE/ANTARA and given at Trawas on April 12, 1994.
- 2 Gregory Fuller, *Das Ende. Von der heiteren Hoffnungslosigkeit im Angesicht der ökologischen Katastrophe*, Zürich: Ammann-Verlag 1993; I have not yet been able to see the book, nor do I know its original English language title, I refer to a review in *Orientierung* 58 (1994), p. 27-29.
- 3 Cf. Bernhard Sutor, *Politische Ethik. Gesamtdarstellung auf der Basis der Christlichen Gesellschaftslehre*, Paderborn: Schöningh 1991, p. 263.

