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## The Environmental Issue: an Existential not a Canonical Problem

From the proceedings of the First Symposium on “Religion, Science and the Environment” (see [www.rsesymposia.org](http://www.rsesymposia.org)),<sup>1</sup> published as *Revelation and the Environment AD 95— AD 1995*, Sarah Hobson and Jane Lubchenco, eds. (World Scientific, 1997): Chapter 4, “Existential Versus Regulative Approaches to the Problem of the Environment.”

The Apocalypse of St John has been regarded as the supreme symbol of the decisive cultural shift which occurred in human history with the advent of Christianity: a shift from *nature* to *History*. The problem of the environment— the violation of nature, its unrestrained exploitation by the human race— is judged to be a necessary consequence of the priority which Christianity gave to history, subordinating nature to an eschatological perspective which entailed its final disappearance for the sake of an eagerly awaited spiritual ‘Kingdom’.

We are speaking of a ‘cultural shift’ because Christianity was preceded by Ancient Greece. To the Greeks the idea of the historicity of nature was unknown. The problem of a beginning in time and a predetermined end did not arise. Nature constituted the fullness of *being*: a beautiful structure of harmony and order which rendered it a *cosmo-cosmema*, an ordered ornament. A perfect universe, harmoniously arranged, with a given absolute rationality, it even encompassed the reality of God, who constituted a part of its general seemliness. Given that the world was eternal, it could not have any goal other than itself. It could only *be*. And the greatest thing that human beings could attain was to *contemplate* and to *imitate* the perfection of the cosmos. Knowledge of the cosmos, *episteme* was identified with virtue, the serene *prudence* that came from participating in the universal ‘common mind’ or logos. The collective imitation of the harmony of the cosmos formed ‘the microcosm of the city’, the common effort of *political life*, which did not differ from the art of the composer or the painter, since it aimed at the same imitation of the laws of the rationality which beautified the universe. What was of the first importance to the Greeks was not ‘*becoming*’ or ‘*the necessary*’, was not potentiality and will, but ‘*being*’ and its rational plenitude.

Modern Europe saw the appearance of Christianity— chiefly through the eyes of Hegel, Fichte and Schelling— as a radical break in the Greek view of nature. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is outside the cosmos. He himself creates the cosmos, giving it a specific temporal beginning and directing it towards a preordained end. Now it is History that has priority not nature, the ‘*becoming*’ of nature not the ‘*being*’ of nature. This historicity of nature is at the outset devalued because it is dominated by the consequence of the ‘fall’ and sin of humanity. Human beings are called upon to participate in History— in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity—

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<sup>1</sup> The Symposium, organized under the aegis of His All-Holiness, Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, and of His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, International President of the Worldwide Fund for Nature, took place on board a ship travelling from Constantinople to Ephesus and then the Island of Patmos, and was held as part of the celebration of the 1900th anniversary of the composition of the *Book of Revelation*, also known as “The Apocalypse”, by St John the Theologian.

and they succeed in the measure in which they are liberated from nature and the necessity of the laws of the fall which held sway over nature. In this perspective, the book of the Apocalypse of St John was interpreted as a radical and final condemnation of nature, since the expected eschatological 'Kingdom' is announced as a nightmare of physical destruction and the collapse of the entire universe. Thus the world is presented as a simple episode in a *History* which essentially undermines it and finally destroys it. The expression 'this world' becomes synonymous with the expression 'this age' and signifies a particular historical period, and 'age' which is inimical and contrary to the 'age which is to come' of the Kingdom of God.

Was the Christian view of nature in reality so radically contrary to the Greek view? Let us put this question to one side for the moment, for I should like to address the second vital 'shift' in our encounter within nature which has been accomplished within the framework of our modern attitudes, our contemporary culture.

This culture was founded by the philosophy of the Enlightenment on a polemical opposition to metaphysics. The opposition expressed a historical need after the painful medieval experience of centuries in the course of which metaphysics were transformed into a dominant ideology of an integral character.

The opposition of our modern culture to metaphysics— the shedding of religious integralism— appeared as an enthusiastic affirmation of nature and the potentialities of nature. It was concerned above all with the knowledge of physical reality, not with its metaphysical supports. It was concerned with humanity, not with people as creator and image of God, but as physical entities, physical individuals. It was concerned with enhancing the value of physical existence and life, not with a morality supported by threats of eternal punishment, but with a conformity to the rationality of nature, a 'Natural Law' which would guarantee the *rights* of every physical individual.

The nature-centred 'shift', however, which modern culture has enshrined, did not entail a return to the ancient Greek interpretation of the world as a measure of rational harmony and plenitude— even though such a return was pursued by the humanists of the West, who worshipped everything Greek. Certainly the character of the only assured interpretation of reality was attributed to nature; the measure and axis of its rational reality was only individual human subjectivity. The rational self-awareness of the human subject was regarded as the only foundation of reality which could not be shaken by doubt.

The nature-centered shift of our modern culture has proved to be anthropocentric, not cosmocentric. Western European man discovered the universe of objective existents with youthful enthusiasm but as master and proprietor. 'I understand means I possess', wrote the young Hegel in his *Early Theological Writings (Theologische Jugendschriften)*. The individual understanding decodes the rationality of nature, intervenes in its powers to draw out a result useful and beneficial to man. Nature in the modern view is a useful object and knowledge, *episteme* is authority.

In this way the concept and imperative of *progress* is introduced for the first time into human History. This no longer has any relationship with the Christian interpretation of the development of History towards a final end of apocalyptic fulfillment. Progress is now the constant extension of the mastery of the human powers of production in the whole of nature. Progress is measured by indicators of productivity and ease of consumption, the economy subordinates politics and every social dynamic and proves to be the exclusive factor and only criterion of social 'development'.

*Res extensa—res cogitans*: the antithetical distinction between man and nature was set out by Descartes who guided medieval scholastic thought to its unforeseen but inevitable consequences. Kant will also interiorise even the objective external world in the subjective

reason: 'Outside myself nothing exists except within my own discernment.' One step further and Hegel will see in the human tool a 'meta-physics' and in technology a 'materialised metaphysics'. He will announce that 'we are much closer to the spirit when we make a tool than when we give birth to a child'. And in absolute accord with the idealist Hegel, the materialist Marx will assert that 'the history of industry is the open book of the essential powers of man, the human psychology which is perceived experimentally'.

From these theoretical opinions to the practice of the violation of nature by technology is but a small step. That is why it seems at least paradoxical that we seek a solution to the problems of the environment today relying on the guide-lines set by a culture of 'modernity' which has led with an iron inevitability to the destruction of the natural environment which now threatens us.

Let us return to the question which we left in abeyance. Was the Christian view of nature in reality so antithetical to the Greek? Is the Apocalypse of St John a triumph of History over nature, the proclamation of the final denigration and destruction of nature for the sake of the messianic Kingdom.

Both questions pose problems of interpretation of the relation and differences between Hellenism and Christianity, and together with these a problem of criteria for understanding the symbolism of the Apocalypse. Hermeneutic differences are not always exhausted on the theoretical level: they can lead also to total transformations of cultures, as happened in Europe in the 11th century. In that period the Graeco-Roman world (the Byzantine world, as we would say today) understood its relationship with Christianity in a manner very different from the way in which the Germanic peoples of central and western Europe understood their relationship both with the Greek and with the Christian tradition.

In the History of Philosophy hermeneutic problems become insoluble if we overlook the discontinuity brought about by that critical rupture in the development of European civilization which we call the 'Great Migration of Peoples', that is to say, if we overlook the fact that from the end of the fourth century until the sixth century AD the greater part of Europe was subjected to a cultural reverse which was literally tragic in comparison with its Graeco-Roman past. The new tribes which migrated and established themselves in Europe at that time— Franks, Goths, Huns, Vandals, Burgundians, Normans— were on a cultural level which was markedly low, if not downright primitive.

The first civilizing step was their conversion to Christianity. But what could conversion mean to peoples who had not even the elementary presuppositions of education for the understanding of the Greek philosophical forms in which Christian experience was expressed? It was inevitable that they would adapt the understanding of Christianity to the level of their own criteria and needs.

In every situation of cultural backwardness in History, the interpretation of the existent and the pragmatic— which endows with meaning the relations between human beings and nature, their fellow human beings and God— becomes a schematic simplification, usually strongly polarized between distinctions of 'good' and 'evil' and is consequently juristic and legal. A characteristic example in Judaic history, for example, is the decline of the Talmudic tradition into pharisaic legalism, or, in the later Hellenistic period, the transmutation of Platonic dualism into Manichean Gnosticism.

For this historical assertion to be properly supported with evidence a special monograph would be needed. Here it is only put forward as a proposal offering a criterion for interpreting the differences distinguishing the Graeco-Roman from the medieval western European version of relations between Hellenism and Christianity. This second version, the medieval western European, was inherited for the most part by the modern world. In his study of Nietzsche,

Heidegger demonstrated clearly the inevitable continuity (*Kontinuität*) of the metaphysics of the western Middle Ages for the theistic and atheistic systems of modern times.

In this short address it is worth touching briefly on some basic theses of the Graeco-Roman version of relations between Hellenism and Christianity, particularly on what concerns the problem of nature and History which is directly localized in the Apocalypse of St John.

Certainly Christianity denies the eternity of the world. But is this element fundamental in treating of ancient Greek cosmology? When the problem of a beginning and an end of the world is not posed, the property of the eternal (the 'ever advancing') relates mainly to the ubiquitous rationality with which the world, independently of time and period, is offered to the vision-contemplation of the human person.

The fundamental distinguishing mark of ancient Greek cosmology is not the eternity of the world, but the recognition of a universal common rational principle (*xynos logos*) which articulates, structures and governs physical or natural reality. This logos forms the universe into a cosmos—an ordered harmony and beauty. The logos-mode of participation in being distinguishes the *essences* of existents, shapes the variety of *forms*, formulates the *laws* of the order and harmony, of the coexistence and movement of beings. The logos-form is the 'lover' of matter, the motive (the appetitive aspect) which urges matter to the movement which gives it form, to the *entelechy* of endowment with form.

This '*logical*' composition and function of the world is neither denied nor destroyed by Christianity. Christianity only interprets it, revealing the uninterpreted gaps of ancient Greek ontology. The logos which brings together, constructs and governs the universe is not an independent given which ends up as blind fate. It is the personal energy of a creating Person, the created result of an uncreated transcendent First Principle. Uncreated and therefore timeless and infinite—that is the existence of God; created and therefore temporal and finite—that is the nature of the world.

The human personal existence, however, of the painter, the sculptor, the composer, is of a different essence from that of painting, sculpture and song. And just as painting, sculpture and song do not cease to be a logos revelatory of the personal otherness and freedom of the creator-artist, so too the world, in spite of its *essential* difference from God does not cease to be a logos revelatory of his Person.

This is a supreme measure of the ecological, as we would say today, attitude of humanity towards nature: For the Christian, nature is not an impersonal and neutral object, even though created by some Supreme Being. Nature is the artifact of a personal God-Logos which reveals in every fold the personal otherness of the creative energy of its maker. The term 'natural contemplation' in the Christian vocabulary refers to the result of ascetic self-transcendence, the ascetic achievement of our transcending our egocentric, acquisitive and exploitative priorities, and our living our relationship with the world in the way we live our relationship with a painted, sculptured, musical or whatever other work of art.

The human person is called not to a one-sided contemplation of the world but to a personal relationship with the logos of the cosmos, because this logos is called to a communion of life with the Creator of the world. The use of the world— food, clothing, tools— is in one way or another a life-giving prerequisite for humanity. This use, however, which serves the daily survival of the created human being can bring about a relationship of communion with God. The appropriation of nature by the human person in order that he should exist, not in the manner of created nature, but in the manner of relationship, of loving communion, is the mode of existence of the Uncreated—for 'God is love' (1 John 4:16).

This is the sense of *Eucharist* which constitutes and forms the Church and gives meaning to the

practice of the Christian life. In the Eucharist Christians receive nature, the cosmos, as food in a direct way— as bread and wine, two kinds of food which encapsulate the things necessary for the sustenance of human life. They receive them ‘with Thanksgiving’ as gifts of God and this receiving constitutes a communion of human beings with God, a cosmic flesh of divine communion. In every Eucharist Christians communicate the flesh of the incarnate Logos, the Logos who became flesh within History as the first-fruit of the power of created nature to exist in the mode of the fullness of life of the Uncreated.

The ‘ecology’ of the Christian Church is the endowment of the world with meaning through the Eucharist and the eucharistic use of the world. This use, however, is not an existential necessity: it constantly takes risks in the existential adventure of the *freedom* of the human person. The book of the Apocalypse uses a striking poetic iconography to picture this current adventure and its eschatological goal, which is ceaselessly fulfilled and is intended to be accomplished not only as the destruction of nature and end of time, but as the restoration of nature and time in a fulfilling communion of life with created and uncreated being, in a universal Eucharist.

The way out from today’s ecological blind alleys cannot be accomplished as long as our culture remains tied to the anthropocentric utilitarianism of the modern world and to its medieval religious roots. A different reading of the Apocalypse of John is indispensable for the formation of a view of the relations between *nature* and *History* which will lead to new criteria with respect to the way the world is used.

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