

„A New Alliance between Humankind and the Environment“

Intervention

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1. To protect the integrity of creation – what do we mean by it?

In a Torah lesson, a Rabbi asked his pupils: “What do you think, what is more beautiful? A cornfield, golden in ripeness, swaying softly in the wind, or a freshly baked bread?” Little Moshe ventured a guess at what the Rabbi most likely wanted to hear, saying: “The cornfield is much more beautiful, because it is made by God.” – “No”, said the Rabbi, “it is the beauty of the bread that goes far beyond that. Because in the bread mingle the beauty of the cornfield and the beauty of human labour. The work of the farmer, of the miller, of the baker refine God’s creation.”

I, too, would have answered like little Moshe did. To me, it is a strange notion to perceive the work of human hands in such a positive light. I have been far too deeply impressed by the criticism of the “old ethics”. This “old ethics”, as the physicist and theologian Ulrich Beuttler dubbed it, was the dominant approach in Christian ethics before a sensitivity for the need to protect the integrity of creation arose.¹

This old ethics was based on the assumption that nature was made to be ruled by humanity and exploited for its benefit. It had devastating consequences. It is, therefore, quite necessary to think about “a New Alliance between Humanity

¹ Cf. Ulrich Beuttler, Nachhaltig bebauen und bewahren. Schöpfungstheologische Impulse zu einer Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit, in: EvTh 5-2011, 341-356. In this intervention, I base my argumentation on the main thoughts outlined in this article.

and the Environment”, as we do to today, here in Tirana. How can we get back to an approach that aims at *refining* God’s creation by the work of our hands?

2. „Subdue the earth“ – coming from the old to a new ethics

The so called „old ethics“ was formed by Cartesian thought. René Descartes described Man as the “maitre et possesseur de la nature“, the “Master and Owner of Nature”. According to Descartes, Man was not himself part of nature any more, but its ruler, endowed with the right to use and exploit nature for his causes. Nature was merely insensate matter. Combined with the biblical order to “subdue the earth” (Gen 1:28), this led to an unholy alliance. Now, Man could think of himself as “Master and Owner of Nature” with divine licence.

But at the latest in 1972, when the Club of Rome roused the public with its report “Limits to Growth”, this notion was shaken. And Christian Faith was put into the dock. In a book titled “The end of providence. The merciless consequences of Christianity“ the author and environmental activist Carl Amery put Christianity into the pillory, as it had propagated Mankind as the centre of creation. The American historian Lynn White had already in 1970 forced the point that science and technique were impregnated by “Christian arrogance”, so that they were no longer in a position to master the ecological crisis. Christianity itself, he asserted, was “deeply at fault”.²

Alerted by this criticism of the old ethics, in my Protestant Church in Germany, in the 1970ies and 80ies the pendulum swung the other direction: Now nature came to be admired as “holy”. A spirituality of nature found its way into the churches. “Every part of the earth is sacred to my people,” this quotation from a famous speech by chieftain Seattle was made into a hymn and the sanctity of creation became part of teaching and proclamation.

² Quotations cf. Ulrich Beuttler, *ibid.*, p. 344f

This was helpful in order to raise awareness for the value of non-human nature. It was, though, also problematic, as it stimulated an unrealistic deification of nature. In the bible, nature is not “good” all by itself. It is rated “very good” (Gen 1:31) only in paradise. Fallen creation is ambivalent. It is not holy in its own right. It is in a state of groaning and moaning, as St Paul puts it in the letter to the Romans (ch. 8). It craves to be restored to its original wholeness. In its own right, it is as little holy as is Man. And as Man is good and evil at the same time, so is creation. It can foster life and destroy it. Waterpower can be transformed into useful energy, and in a tsunami it can wreak havoc. The sun is the condition of life and the cause of lethal drought. Fallen creation craves cultivation.

A new alliance between humankind and the environment can be inspired by biblical wisdom. Because biblical realism protects us both from the old rationalistic instrumentalisation of nature and an unrealistic deification of it. It gives us the freedom to do the possible without expecting that our actions save the world. We must not commit the same error twice and overrate our capabilities, so that we, in a new way, become “Master and Owner of the Earth”, now in the capacity as its only possible saviour. A *realistic* understanding of our own possibilities is based on the conviction that God himself values and protects his creation and that we, as humanity, have to contribute in an appropriate, limited but responsible way.

3. Biblical guidelines

In the bible we find some helpful guidelines in this endeavour:³

4.1 Creation is perceived as a “household”. From the Greek word for “house”, “oikos”, comes our term “ecology”. In this house, there are

³ Cf. Ulrich Beuttler, *ibid.*, p. 347-351

different, independent, but interrelated areas of life. Psalm 104 describes this as a wise, dynamic order: “O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your possessions.” (Ps 104:24).

4.2 Man is part of this order of life. Like animals, he has life breathed into him by God; like animals and plants he has an irrepressible will to live. The environment is God’s creation like Man is, and yet does he have a special role! Only Man is responsive to God. Only he is made in the image of God, is in his likeness.

4.3 Man, therefore, has no natural habitat within creation. He has to make the effort of cultivation to gain one. To him, “mother nature” is no benevolent, loving mother. She charms him with her beauty, but keeps him only as he strives for survival, unlike a loving mother: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Gen 3:19). Thus, “Mother” Earth can be all his happiness and, in the next moment, a lethal threat.

4.4 As Man is subordinate directly to God, it is he who has a special commission within creation. He can, by his cultural achievement, liberate creation from its groaning and labouring and restore at least a semblance of the original “very good” creation of God. He can, as the Rabbi said, “refine” creation.

4.5 Now, how can Man fill this office of his? – By fostering and developing the good, beneficial relations within creation, and containing the destructive relations that despise and threaten life. He can urge the house rules in the “oikos”, so that the conditions for life remain intact for future generations.

This way, the new alliance between humanity and the environment can be a success.

4. What we can do

In my church, we try to be good stewards of the „oikos“ and have adopted an „environmental concept“. For this, we have defined five roles for the church:

5.1 We are ourselves a *big business*, with our many churches, houses, estates and forests. The concept defines how we shall make use of energy, mobility, land, wood and real estate.

5.2 We are a *political actor*. We become publicly engaged for the success of the energy transition, so that in future energy is generated not from soft coal or nuclear energy. We support actions for a new climate policy.

5.3 We offer society a space for discussion, a *forum* where different opinions can be voiced, so as to raise awareness.

5.4 We are a *community of divine service*, which includes the issue of integrity of creation in its proclamation and prayer.

5.5 We are an *educational institution*, and we integrate environmental issues in our schools, religious classes and further education.

This way, sustained by the belief that God himself preserves his world, we try to form and practice a new alliance between humanity and the environment, and to make our contribution towards protecting the integrity of creation.

Thank you for your attention!