



Reconciliation with Nature*

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The destruction of the environment, which we perpetrate through the present world economy, will seriously endanger the survival of humanity, at the latest in the 21st century. Modern industrial society has knocked the organism of the earth out of balance, and we are heading towards universal ecological death, if we cannot change the development. If all people drove as many automobiles and emitted as much exhaust into the air as Germans and Americans, the human race would probably have already died out.

Is transformation of industrial societies or the ecological reintegration of human civilization into the nature of earth's organism still possible? What can churches and the faithful contribute? I believe that the ecological crisis in nature today is, at the same time, a religious crisis of the Western world. The first part of this essay explains how this is so. The second then offers three perspectives from biblical and Christian traditions which can overcome this two-fold crisis.

I. THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS OF THE MODERN WORLD

The living relationship of human society to its natural environment is determined by those *technologies* by which humans obtain food from nature and then give back their garbage. This *metabolism with nature*, in itself quite natural, like inhaling and exhaling air, since the beginning of industrialization has been determined and controlled more and more exclusively by humans apart from nature. Our "throw-away society" believes whatever is thrown away is "gone." What a deadly illusion! What exists never disappears; nothing that one throws away is really "gone," but stays somewhere in nature and at some point returns.

The *natural sciences* are built into human technologies. Technology is applied

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natural science and all natural scientific knowledge is at some time technically utilized and put into practice: "Knowledge is power" (Francis Bacon). Technologies and natural sciences always develop out of specific *human interests*. These human interests precede them, guide them, and make use of them, and are in turn regulated by the *basic values* and *convictions* of a society.

When a crisis implying the "death of nature" arises in a life system connecting human society to the surrounding nature, the crisis logically affects the whole system—attitudes towards

life, life styles, and, not least, basic values and convictions. The crisis is, therefore, not only an “ecological crisis” external to us, nor can it be solved only technically. Any solution necessitates a reorientation in convictions and in basic values as well as in attitudes towards life and life styles. What interests or values rule our “modern” civilization? Bluntly put, it is the unlimited *will to dominate*, which continues to drive modern humanity to the *seizure of power over the nature* of the earth. Our greed for power is insatiable because we have lost the living God and instead have developed a God-complex of our own.

When we compare our civilization with premodern cultures, there is an immediately striking difference between *growth* and *equilibrium*. Premodern cultures were by no means “primitive” or “underdeveloped,” but rather highly complex systems of equilibrium regulating the relationships of humans to nature, to each other, and to the gods. Modern civilizations, on the other hand, are one-sidedly programmed for development, growth, expansion, and conquest. In fact, gaining and safeguarding power and the “pursuit of happiness” are the basic values operative in our society. Why has this become so?

The deepest reason probably resides in the *religion of modern Western humans*. Judeo-Christian religion has recently been assigned responsibility for humanity’s seizure of power over nature and for the recklessness of human will to dominate and control. Even though many moderns do not consider themselves especially religious, they have, nevertheless, done everything possible to fulfill the divine commandment and destiny: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” They have, so to speak, already overfilled their quota. This commandment and its associated image of the human are, however, more than three thousand years old, while the modern expansionist culture began in Europe only four hundred years ago with the colonization of America. Therefore, the reasons must lie elsewhere. In my opinion they lie in modern humanity’s *image of God*.

Since the Renaissance, God has always been understood one-sidedly as “The Almighty.” *Omnipotence* has been valued as the superior characteristic of godliness. God is the Lord and the world is God’s property to do with whatever God wills. God is the *absolute subject* and the world is the *passive object* of God’s dominion. As God’s likeness on earth, humans must understand themselves correspondingly as a subject, namely, as the subject of knowledge and will, and the world as their passive object to be conquered. It is only through domination over the earth that humanity can correspond to God, the Lord of the world. Just as God is the Lord and owner of the whole world, so humans must work to become lords and owners of the earth and of themselves. According to this understanding, neither through goodness and truth, nor through patience and love, but through power and domination humans prove their likeness to God. At the beginning of the modern era the French philosopher René Descartes in his philosophy of science thus declared it to

be the aim of the natural sciences to make the human “Lord and owner of nature.”

When we contrast this aim with the famous accusatory speech of Indian Chief Seattle in 1855, the situation at which we have arrived is immediately clear:

Every part of this country is sacred to my people, every glittering pineneedle, every sandy beach, all the fog in the dark forests....The rocky hills, the gentle

meadows, the body warmth of ponies—and of the human—they all belong to the same family.

We stand facing the decisive question: Is nature our property to do with what we want—or are we humans part of the larger family of nature which demands and deserves our respect? Do the rainforests belong to us humans to cut and burn—or as the home of many animals, plants, and trees do they, like us, belong to the earth? Is the earth our “environment” and our “planetary home”—or are we simply guests on this earth which still tolerates us humans so patiently and graciously?

If nature is nothing other than property, then we will simply address the ecological crisis with more technology. Through new genetic engineering, we will attempt to create climate-resistant plants and animals, or to breed a new human race, which needs only a technical environment. We may well be able to create such a world to support our numbers and our habits, but it will remain an artificial world, a global space station. We can also change our habits and our numbers, but how shall we change our behavior?

II. THREE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES TO OVERCOME THE CRISIS

1. The Divine Spirit Is the Life of the Whole Creation.

The first change involves our image of God. Our thinking about God shapes the way we think about ourselves and nature. “Tell me what you believe and I will tell you who you are.” Belief in the almighty Lord God in heaven has led to secularization of the world and robbed nature of its divine mystery. We need to rediscover the *triune God*. However dogmatic, orthodox, and old fashioned it sounds, it is nevertheless true. Simply hearing the name “of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” already imparts this sense of the divine mystery as wonderful community. The triune God is not the lonely, unloved ruler in heaven, who subjects everything in dominion, but a communal God rich in relationships: “God is love.”

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live *together* and *for each other* and *in each other* in the highest and most perfect community of love one can imagine: “I am in the Father, the Father is in me, I and the Father are one,” says Jesus. If this is true, then it is not through domination and subjection, but through community and life-promoting mutuality that one corresponds to this triune God. Not the human as a lonely subject, but the human in community is God’s true likeness on earth. Not the single parts, but the creation-community as a whole is what reflects God’s wisdom and beauty. All things are created “of God,” formed “through God,” and exist “in God” and God “in” them. As Ps 104:29-30 says:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath,
they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

Christian faith has seen in Christ not only personal salvation, but also the

wisdom through which the world was created and is maintained, the cosmic wisdom through which all things exist. Those who worship Christ also venerate all created things in him and

venerate him in all created things. In the Gospel of Thomas, Logion 77, there is an unknown saying of Jesus:

I am the light which is over everything.
I am the All; the All came forth from me
and the All has reached to me.
Split the wood; I am there.
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.

Whatever we do to nature, we do to Christ.

Where God's Word is, there is God's Spirit. According to Gen 1-2, the vibrant energy of the Spirit of God precedes creation through the Word. All things are created through God's words, by which names are bestowed, distinctions created, and judgments made. Hence all things differ individually "according to their kinds." But when God speaks, it is always the breath of the Spirit that "makes alive." Word and Spirit supplement each other in regard to the community of creation. The Word specifies and differentiates; the Spirit unites and creates harmony. In human speech, though the words and utterances are distinct and different, they are imparted with the same breath. Likewise we can say figuratively that God "speaks" through the individual creatures or, as a beautiful English hymn puts it, "God breathes through the whole creation." The integrity of creation and the community of creatures is sustained by the breath of the Spirit of God. Because by Word and Spirit the Creator is imparted to creation and enters into it, we can thus praise God:

O Lord, you are the lover of life
and thy immortal spirit is in all things. (Wisd of Sol 11:26-12:1)

Creation, therefore, is not simply to be called a "work of God's hands." All things have been created to make the "common house" of all creatures the "house of God," in which God can live eternally with creatures and they with God. The biblical expression of this is the figure of the Temple of God:

The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands;
as the prophet says,
"Heaven is my throne,
and earth my footstool.
What house will you build for me,
says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?" (Acts 7:48-49; cf. Isa 66:1)

The Lord's house and place of rest is the cosmos. Adoration of God on a cosmic level and in all things follows from this view of both the Spirit of God in all things and their preparation to be God's home. What Christians do in church is thus relevant in a representative way to the whole cosmos.

Limiting the church merely to the world of human beings and, within that human world, to the salvation of the soul was a dangerous modern constriction. If the church is indeed oriented

towards the cosmos, the “ecological crisis” of earthly creation is also the crisis of the church itself. As “flesh of its flesh and bones of its bones” it will be destroyed, if the earth is destroyed. The whole community of

creation suffers with the death of earth’s weaker creatures. The church which sees itself as the representative of creation suffers on the part of the weaker creatures and has to cry out in open protest at this pain. Not only our “human environment” suffers, but also creation, which is ordained to be “God’s environment.”

2. *God’s Covenant Creates Justice in the World of Humans and of Nature.*

Because of God’s love, no creature is indifferent in God’s eyes. All creatures have their own dignity and rights by their inclusion within God’s covenant. God says in the story of Noah: “I am establishing my covenant with *you and your descendants* after you, and with *every living creature* that is with you” (Gen 9:9-10).

Fundamental human rights come from the “with you.”

The *rights of future generations* come from the “and your descendants.”

The *rights of nature* come from the “and with every living creature.”

Before God the Creator, we *and* our descendants *and* every living creature are to be respected equally as God’s covenantal partners. Nature is not our property, nor are we simply a part of nature. Those who destroy nature destroy themselves. Those who injure the dignity of animals, injure God.

Today, it is time to draft and to approve a *General Declaration of the Rights of Nature* to stand alongside the “General Declaration of Human Rights” of 1948. Insofar as nature—air, water, land, and animals—risks being subjected to human violence, it must be protected by human legal structures. A first attempt to free nature from human arbitrariness is represented in the “World Charter for Nature,” agreed upon by the United Nations on October 18, 1982. Although this charter does not go so far as to grant nature its own rights and to acknowledge nature as a legal subject, it does attempt to move beyond the anthropocentric and narrowly egocentric perspective of the modern world which sees nature to be there only for humans.

“The human is a part of nature,” says the charter’s preamble. All other living forms are to be respected, independent of their value to human beings. This morally correct appeal must also be legally anchored, however, so that nature is not dependent on human benevolence, but rather is acknowledged as subject of its own rights. It was not the benevolence of the masters but the struggle for human rights that abolished slavery. In the same way the liberation of nature can come about only when it is seen as a partner of humanity and a covenantal partner of God.

Some scholars see the protection of nature from destruction by human beings as essentially connected to the minimum guarantee of individual human rights. Just as every human being has a right to physical inviolability (“freedom from physical harm”), so every human being has a right to an inviolate natural environment—pure air, pure water, an unspoiled earth. From this perspective, other living beings are related only to human beings; they are simply the “environment” of human beings.

But if this earth, along with all other living beings, is God’s creation, then its dignity must be respected for God’s sake and it must also be protected for its own sake. In the modern world,

the earth, along with its living beings, is threatened above all by economic exploitation, industry, commerce, and mass conurbations. It must therefore be placed under the special protection of the state, and a statement such as the following should be integrated into our constitutions:

The natural world is under the special protection of government. By its actions,

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the state respects the natural environment and protects it from exploitation and destruction by human beings for its own sake.

A further amplification of such a statement is represented in the following proposal developed by a group of professors of international and constitutional law and theologians in Bern and Tübingen:

Rights of Nature: A Proposal

1. Nature—animated or not—has a right to existence, that means, to preservation and development.
2. Nature has a right to protection of its ecosystems, species, and populations in their interrelatedness.
3. Animated nature has a right to the preservation and development of its genetic potential.
4. Living beings have a right to a life and propagation in ecosystems appropriate to their species.
5. Interventions in nature require justification. They should only be allowed: — when the presumptions of intervention have been determined in a democratically legitimated process and under the observation of the rights of nature; — when the interests of intervention are of more importance than the interests of an intact preservation of the rights of nature; and — when the intervention is not excessive. After any damage, nature is to be restored, whenever possible.
6. Ecosystems of a rare type are to be placed under absolute protection, especially if they contain many species. The extermination of species is prohibited.

We appeal to the United Nations to expand its General Declaration of Human Rights and to explicitly formulate these named rights. At the same time, we appeal to individual nations to include these rights in their constitutions and laws.

3. The Sabbath of the Earth: Divine Ecology

For some time humans have regarded nature and themselves only from the perspective of their work. They have seen only one side, the usable side of nature. There is, however, in ancient Jewish wisdom a special resource for understanding nature as the creation and home of God: *celebration of the Sabbath*, the day of rest, the day of not interfering with nature. According to the creation narrative, the Creator “fulfilled” creation by celebrating a world Sabbath. God “rested” from the work of creation (Gen 2:3). Through resting presence, God blessed creation.

God acted no more, but God was fully present. This divine Sabbath, not the creation of humanity, is the true “crown of creation.” Rather, humanity is crowned together with all other creatures through the divine “queen Sabbath.” Through the Sabbath rest, the creative God reaches the goal of creation, and humans, by their celebration of the Sabbath, perceive and allow nature to be God’s creation. The Sabbath is both wise environmental politics and good therapy for ourselves and our restless souls.

There is still another significance of the Sabbath. It is the significance of the Sabbath year for the survival of the land and the people living on the land. In Exod 23:10-11, Israel is commanded to let the land rest every seventh year, so that “the poor of your people may eat.” In Lev 25:4, the same law is repeated, but for a different reason: “In the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land.” The social concern is opened to the concern for the earth.

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For Leviticus (see especially chap. 26) the Sabbath year’s rest of the land is of utmost importance. All the blessings of the land will be enjoyed by the obedient, but God will punish the disobedient. Lev 26:33-35 speaks of the How? and the Why? “And you I will scatter among the nations...your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste,” because “then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies....As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.”

This is the remarkable *ecological* interpretation of Israel’s exile in Babylon: God wanted to save the land! God let the people be deported to give the land rest to recreate. The sabbatical year is God’s *conservation strategy* for the earth and all its creatures. All the old agricultural systems knew the wisdom of fallowing to ensure the fertility of the soil. Only the great empires have exploited fertile regions in order to supply the capital and the army until the soil was exhausted and turned into desert, and the empire fell to pieces (Babylon, Persia, Rome). Today the principle of fallowing has almost entirely disappeared from agricultural practice. The industrialization of farming has applied more and more chemical fertilizers to the soil. Monocultures have replaced systems of crop rotation. The result is heavier use of artificial fertilizers and progressive poisoning of the soil and crops.

The result will also be similar to the experience of ancient Israel. Non-stop exploitation of the soil will lead to the exile and extinction of humankind. After the death of humankind, nature and the earth will get its sabbath rest, which modern humankind has so far denied. Thus, if we wish our culture and our soil to survive, let us be warned; let us again respect the “sabbath of solemn rest for the land.” Such a celebration of the Sabbath can become a rescue for us and for the earth upon which our life depends. This simple sabbatical restraint of the self from intrusion into the creation, this act of praise of “let it be” will help the land and us.

During the oil crisis of 1973, one Sunday was declared an “automobile-free day” in West Germany. It was one of the most beautiful days I can remember. Children played soccer on the Autobahn; adults sat in the intersections playing cards; dogs ran around in the streets. This is possible: much of our traffic is superfluous. And after all, one can also ride a bicycle.

Why don’t we add the Sabbath to Sunday for ourselves and stop the environmental pollution on Saturdays: a day without automobiles, a day without work? Why don’t we take a Sabbath year for ourselves every seventh year instead of making pre-retirement or early

retirement arrangements? Why don't we promote the fallow-field principle in agriculture?

The Sabbath laws are, according to the Bible, *God's ecological strategy* to preserve the life which God created. With its rest and its time rhythm the Sabbath is also the strategy which leads out of the ecological crisis and shows us, in contrast to a one-sided progress at the expense of nature, the value of sustainable development and harmony with nature.

And the Peace of God
be with the land and the sea,
with the forests and the meadows,
with the flowers and the animals.
The Peace of God be with us
in community with all our
fellow creatures.