



The Weeping Mask: Ecological Crisis and the View of Nature

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I. THE ASYMMETRIC FACE OF ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Times of crisis are frequently also times of birth. Yet a birth is always also an experience of fear and death. In the case of the ecological crisis the relation between the hope for a rebirth and the experience of fear and death is marked by an enormous asymmetry. What hope there is is nurtured by very relative and dim signs, while the fears and manifestations of death remain absolute and bright in their evidences. One species is granted some guarantee of continued life; a reservation is created that will preserve an environment; a river shows a falling rate of pollution; or successful negotiation diminishes by percentage points the production of a chemical polluter. However, the specter of a total collapse of the ecosystem that sustains life as we know it still haunts hearts and minds. Such is the pessimistic diagnosis of the crisis. We mend in retail what we destroy in wholesale.

It is no surprise that in such a context the discipline of eschatology no longer appears the exclusive domain of theology or religious studies. Calculations of the outside limit for the existence of the earth before it is engulfed by an expanding sun—4 to 5 billion years—foster a sense of relativity as to the ontological status of the earth. Those years sound almost like an eternity when compared to some other dates, ranging from “the day after” to ten, fifty, or a hundred years, which scientists have shown to be plausible for scheduling the apocalypse on our agendas.

The asymmetry between the small signs of hope and the terrifying visions raised by the imminence of an ecological collapse has revealed to us that there is another crisis behind the ecological one. The problem lies not only in what could be called the ontological character of the crisis, i.e., what the crisis really is, but also in its symbolic character. We lack a vision embodying a meaning capable of

plunging us into another manner of imagining nature and redefining our relations within the environment.

R. G. Collingwood¹ has described the evolution from the Greek organic view of nature to the Western mechanistic understanding that came with the Renaissance. In its modern version the meaning of nature has been dissolved finally into the idea of history. Such development is an accumulation of losses, the most important of which is the disappearance of space as a category that cannot be reduced to extension—extension understood as a simple medium which once possessed becomes an exchangeable value. In the name of the relativity of time and space, we have sacrificed this notion of irreducible space in favor of a quasi-absolute notion of history.²

Our lack of understanding of existence as being conditioned by the place that occupies us has exiled us from pre-modern or ancient views, in which the detachment of a people from its place is a rupture that amounts to death. This manner of thinking is expressed powerfully in the words of Job who says of those who go down to Sheol that from there they will not return “nor do their places know them any more” (Job 7:10). The symbolic character of the crisis has turned the ecological problem into a riddle that will not be solved either by oblivion or by a quantitative increase of technical solutions.

II. THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

The very term “ecology” appeared in our vocabulary only at the end of the last century, used then to designate that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their environment. Only in the middle of this century has the term begun to be applied also to human communities and to receive the common meaning of a science that studies the structure and development of human communities and the effects of their processes of adaptation to the environment.

Thus we are dealing with a new term that refers to a new problem linked to Western societies. It is one of those problems that humanity poses for itself in order to solve it. It is certainly the case that the very fact of raising the problem allows for some optimism, if we agree with Karl Marx’s observation that humanity poses for itself only the problems it can solve. But as soon as we start to deal with such problems, we are left with the impression of trying to cover ourselves with a short blanket. For example, the implementation of the grand projects in the Amazon region will certainly increase the gross national product and the average income of Brazilians, which might offer the opportunity to bring great portions of the population out of absolute poverty. For these and other reasons huge dams were built for the generation of electricity and thousands of hectares of rain forest were destroyed. Still other dams are planned. To avoid the flooding of the Amazon region that these dams would necessitate, the building of nuclear plants was proposed. Thermoelectric plants would accomplish the same purpose. We are still left with difficult choices: continuing the rate of destruction of the forests, which expends great amounts of non-renewable fuel and also aggravates the greenhouse effect, or

¹R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1960).

²See my article “Sinais dos Lugares: As Dimensões Esquecidas,” in *Peregrinação: estudos em Homenagem a Joachim H. Fischer*, ed. Martin N. Dreher (São Leopoldo, Brazil: Sinodal, 1990) 255-68.

facing the problem of disposing of atomic waste—not to mention the risk of accidents.

Obviously, the presupposition is that we will need ever-increasing amounts of electrical energy for development. Environmentalists will immediately say that the model of development must be questioned, that we need a sustainable development using alternative sources of energy. But the complex technology involved has made such proposals more of a problem than a solution for the two-thirds of the world’s population who live on the other side of development. This is the reason why, when such solutions arrive south of the equator with a nordic accent, it is as if the winner wants to stop the game before the score starts to shift.

It is indeed the case that we are all in this vessel together, and that national or regional interests cannot override the chances of life for the whole of humanity. However, the problem is

who decides the measures that will be taken to save the earth? Gerald Barney illustrates this problem rather well.

Consider the hole in the ozone layer. The hole was caused in large part by CFC³ chemicals produced and used in the industrialized nations. One of the most damaging is the refrigerant, CFC-12. It is used in virtually all refrigerators and air-conditioners. Refrigeration of food is one of the key ways to reduce diarrheal disease, which is a major cause of infant mortality in developing countries. Are 4 billion poor people to be allowed to put as much CFC-12 per capita into the ozone layer as we in the industrialized countries already have? Are 4 billion poor people to be told they can't have refrigeration unless they buy more expensive refrigerators that don't use CFC-12?⁴

The reduction in the production of CFC by thirty-five percent until 1999 has been already approved by the Montreal Protocol of 1987, subscribed to by twenty-four industrialized nations. The problem seems to lie not so much in the diagnosis nor even in some of the basic measures that must be adopted, but rather in who decides where and when they ought to be implemented. Furthermore, there is a lack of legitimacy—or even will—in those who currently hold the power to make some decisions. Hypocritical situations are created. A highway project in the state of Acre in the heart of the Amazon region, which should link Brazil to Peru and thus to the Pacific Ocean, has been politically and financially supported by Japan, which has aluminum plants in the region. The United States, however, has opposed the project, giving ideological and financial support to the organizations of the peoples of the forest. But, simultaneously, the United States is supporting the militarization of the Amazon region which is regarded as a major threat to both the forest and the indigenous population. The ostensibly pro-environment action of the United States against the Acre highway is in fact only a geopolitical and economic action against the growing Japanese influence in the area.

In his book on Simon Bolivar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez reports a conversation of the general with a Frenchman, who was trying to teach him how to organize a politically-advanced system. At the end of a lengthy argument, Bolivar remarks:

“Don't try to teach us how we shall be, don't try to make us like yourselves, don't

³Chlorofluorocarbon.

⁴Gerald Barney in a letter to bishops, executives, chairs, and leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, presented at the “Year 2000 and Beyond” conference (March 30-April 2, 1989).

expect us to do well in twenty years what you have so badly done in two thousand....Damn you! Please, let us by ourselves make our own Middle Ages.”⁵

III. REPENTANCE AND REVISION

Gone are the days in which ecological problems were regarded as a North Atlantic issue. It is no longer feasible to separate economic and social justice from environmental concerns, as the case of Chico Mendes so well illustrates. But neither is there any reason for accepting the

proposal to begin ecological action as if the political and economic actions of the past could be totally forgotten. Brazil got its name from a reddish wood—brazilwood—which practically disappeared in the first centuries after the conquest. It was all transported to Europe in caravels, whose construction contributed to the deforesting of Europe. “The forests of Europe were sacrificed so that the forests of America, Africa, and India with their coveted noble woods could be exploited.”⁶ It is not by chance that Luther saw a sign of the coming of the end to be the disappearance of wild forests. This past history cannot be used to deny the gravity of the environmental problems we face. Nevertheless, it argues for an unavoidable suspicion regarding the integrity of the sympathetic proposals coming from those who not long ago established the pattern for what progress meant and how our relation with nature should be framed.

If it is so that an efficacious approach to the ecological crisis requires a qualitative leap, a symbolic shift, that will allow for a new paradigm for framing our view of nature, then we should not wait for a solution from those who historically represent the very attitude that lies at the root of the crisis. Humans have turned their best creative efforts against nature and the environment, but not all have done so to the same degree. For a rebirth to come, for the new vision to be formed, repentance is presupposed. To borrow the words of Bernard of Clairvaux, it will come only through the gift of tears (*dona lacrimarum*). But who carries the enormous guilt of such sin? To universalize it, as some modern Marcionites do, would not only render any corrective effort senseless, but would also compromise the intended original goodness of all creation by dualistically dissociating grace from nature. It is important to recover the theology of creation in this effort to recognize the dignity of nature and our particular responsibility for its depletion.

Discussion of the ecological problem in theological terms is compelled by consciousness of a need for a point of departure that transcends the predicaments of anthropocentrism. A theological approach to nature is, by definition, theocentric. This means that nature is not something merely given, but it is creation; its main reference point is God. Ontologically, humans stand on the same level as the rest of nature; their difference is only an analytical one.

IV. DOMINION AND SUBJECTION

Within the Christian tradition, however, we face some problems when addressing ecological issues or when trying to find relevant images to redress the issue. There is very little in the Bible or in history that can be regarded as somehow directly related to the issue. Indeed, the wrath of Jesus against a fig tree (Mark

⁵Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *O General em seu Labirinto* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Record, 1989) 129.

⁶Christian Schütze, “Waldgeschichte und Weltgeschichte,” *Der berblick* 3 (1989) 8.

11:12-14, 20) or the folkloric narrative of Saint Boniface cutting a sacred oak in order to demonstrate the power of the Christian faith against paganism certainly will not be the best images in support of the ecological movement. But the difficulties go further, and question even creation theology as a ground for an ecological consciousness or as a possible contribution to overcome the symbolic character of the crisis.

In a well-known article, published in 1967, on the “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. caused immense impact and received equal support for his affirmation that “our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man’s relation to

nature.”⁷ He saw such attitudes to be the result of the foundational axiom of the Judeo-Christian tradition, according to which nature has no other reason for existing except to serve the human. The Priestly account of Creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a) conveys this peculiar viewpoint: the human is the last act of Creation from whom all the rest of creation receives meaning, being placed at the human’s disposal. For White, Christianity inherits and radicalizes this view, becoming the most anthropocentric of the religions that the world has seen. Herein lies the contradiction with which we live. It is the crown of all creation (Ps 8) that turns itself against its own biological support. White argues in conclusion that the Judeo-Christian teleology, by which everything is understood from the perspective of human redemption, is the only frame within which it is possible to conceive of the development of human sciences. Still it is White himself who turns to Eastern Christian mysticism and to the piety of Francis of Assisi in search of the religious antidote to the Western flaws, even suggesting Saint Francis as a “patron saint for ecologists.” On this point his article was not forgotten. Thirteen years later Pope John Paul II proclaimed Francis of Assisi the “patron saint of ecology.”

The argument of White rests on two pillars. First, he affirms that the relation *homo-natura* constitutes the fundamental opposition in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Second, he maintains that this opposition, which favors the human at the expense of the rest of nature, is the foundation upon which Western science and technology grew.

As to the first point, White’s interpretation depends upon his reading of Gen 1:1-2:4a. In fact, the affirmations that the human is given the dominion and the right to subdue nature (vv. 26 and 28) and that the appearance of the creature of earth (*adam*) is in the image of God seem to give prima facie support to White, if taken outside of their context. Although White’s position is well-argued, some observations must be made in response.

The Priestly account of Creation does not culminate in the creation of the human being, but with the Sabbath of God, in which all creation rests, and which serves also as the justification for the Jubilee of Leviticus 25. Doxology is the goal toward which all creation is directed. The text itself has its setting in the cultic life of the community; it is a liturgy. Doxology is the *telos* toward which the text itself was composed.⁸ That the text was composed during the Babylonian captivity gives even more relevance to its radical affirmation of the day of rest and worship. The

⁷*Science* 155 (1967) 1203-7.

⁸Milton Schwantes, *Projetos de Esperança* (Petrópolis, Brazil: Vozes/CEDI/Sinodal, 1989) 32-35.

pattern used to frame the narrative is influenced by the Babylonian myth of creation. But in comparison to the latter, it shows an interesting rupture. The Babylonian myth locates the establishment of the monarchy and of the official cult right after the creation of the human being.⁹ Furthermore, the affirmation that the human is made in the image of God differs significantly from contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths, where it is only the king who is described as being made in the image of the creator.¹⁰

It is in such a context that the problematic statement about dominion over nature must be framed. While that dominion is generally referred to the whole earth, only animals are specifically mentioned. The main point to be noted about this affirmation is its negative tone. What is stressed is not what humans can do toward nature, but that all human beings are equal to each other in the face of God. It is an affirmation of democracy. Besides, when dominion is

asserted in the naming of the animals, they are simultaneously excluded from the human diet (Gen 1:29). What would be the point of asserting such dominion?

To dominate the animals can be interpreted as a mandate for peaceful coexistence. At least until the Neolithic Age (ca. 3000 B.C.), animals represented a threat to the very survival of the human race, whose numbers are estimated at no more than 100 million. It is even probable that the great steppes of Europe and Asia were a result of the method of hunting with fire during the Pleistocene Age. In this context, the *imago*, besides affirming that humans should not dominate over other human beings, reflects as well the fear that the animal world represented. The ecological problem appears here only in its reverse side. The human communities are still the weak link in the environmental chain. It is, therefore, not the opposition between humans and nature that characterizes this text. On the contrary, what is seen is the recognition of the human frailness within creation. The implication of such a recognition is even strengthened when we observe that it is a people in captivity who used it to affirm its faith. The spirit of the text should now maintain the concern for the new weak link in creation—the animal world. Milan Kundera is right when he suggests that the true moral test for humanity is its relationship with those who are subject to us—the animals.

Correct in White's argument is that the ecological crisis is intimately linked with Western science and technology. Although the history and origin of science and technology are a matter of great dispute, particularly as to possible Christian influence, this debate need not concern us here. For our purpose, it is only important to establish how nature came to be viewed not only as a reality to be subdued, but as merely having use-value for humans without any dignity in itself. Such dignity the Priestly account maintains by affirming liturgically the goodness of the acts of Creation in each and every day. The Christian tradition reaffirmed this dignity by its vigorous rejection of gnosticism. It does not seem plausible to deduce from this tradition the reduction of nature to a source of value to be accumulated.

Rather, the first step toward seeing nature's value only in its use takes place with the astronomic revolution of Copernicus in the sixteenth century. His heliocentric system "consisted not so much in displacing the world's centre from the

⁹Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 51.

¹⁰Nelson Kilpp, *Teologia do Antigo Testamento* (São Leopoldo, Brazil: Mimeo, 1988).

earth to the sun as in implicitly denying that the world has a centre at all."¹¹ Matter had been homogenized; the world had no objective reference of its own. From this point it was not far to the new Baconian understanding of reason as an organ for the examination, prediction, and control of natural processes. The Cartesian dualism between mind and body, the thinking thing and the extended thing, was the first philosophical formulation of a view of nature as a machine at the disposal of the thinking "points" that explore and manipulate it.¹² Even the overcoming of this view, with history being the paradigm to frame nature, has not restored what Scheler called the psychic drives of matter, in spite of the efforts of a Hegel, a Whitehead, or the one-sidedness of the vitalists.

V. THE WRAPPINGS OF THE SACRED

We certainly face more than an ideological problem. The current ecological crisis

emerged in the midst of a social, economic, and political system that affirms a model of social organization and economic development to which the crisis is endemic; it is not restricted to a side-effect that could be corrected with some minor adjustments. However, an alternative economic or socio-political model of society will not suffice by itself to address environmental issues. The problem is a global one; it requires the reshaping of the very cultural values that have oriented the present hegemonic civilizations of the world. It is therefore a cultural problem in its broadest etymological sense. It implies the recognition of what we have done with the mandate to cultivate the earth. It goes to the source of this mandate, to its religious substance. The required reorientation implies, therefore, a religious act of repentance which will need to break with three fundamental myths that modernity has cherished. The first is the myth of the atomic individual; the second is the myth of progress through accumulation; and the third is the myth of private piety.

1. The Myth of the Individual

Since Hobbes, and extending through Leibniz to recent neopositivists, the individual has been the irreducible component of the social matrix. Nietzsche well described this understanding when he said that the individual is the most recent creation. Collectivity, civil society, is a compound of contractual arrangements among individuals in the affirmation of their interests. Such arrangements are expression of a rationality that, as Max Weber has shown, gives to modern capitalist societies the shape of an efficient bureaucratic machine.

What disappears with modernity is community as a center of decision, of power, and of the identity of the individual. The divorce of individuals from their vocations has reduced social interaction to function and role. Organic solidarity is lost with the separation of reason from passion, of the group from its constitutive place, of social function from individual identity, and, finally, of mind from body. The recovery of a sense of community might represent the relinquishment of some important values of bourgeois civilization, like that of individual freedom, but it might be the price we will have to pay in order to have an organic understanding of the use of power, in which justice will be not only distributive and retributive,

¹¹Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, 97.

¹²Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature* (New York: Beacon, 1961) 72.

but fundamentally contributive for the sake of the community in the context in which it is constituted.

2. The Myth of Accumulation as Progress

The second myth to be fought demands a reconsideration of our understanding of labor. Basic for the triumph of the spirit of capitalism is the understanding of labor as the individual or corporative appropriation of nature not only for human ends, but for the sake of further accumulation. To Karl Marx, who called this process “originary accumulation,” we owe the insight that proper to capitalist economy is the transformation of money into capital by the inversion of the traditional relation between commodity and money. Accordingly, commodities become the means to the end of accumulating money; i.e., money, instead of functioning as a universal mediation of value, becomes, as capital, a value in itself. Consequently, nature loses its

proper and independent dignity and the product extracted from it, defined by its use, establishes its value. The accumulation of such value determines the rhythm of progress.

Intrinsic to the use-value of a commodity we will find also its abuse, an abuse that does not refer exclusively to nature outside of human existence. The very nature that constitutes the body of the worker is treated in the same way and viewed as a means for the accumulation of value. Considerations of value always begin from the results of productive effort, and not from the organic relation of the human within nature. Marx saw original accumulation as playing the same role in political economy as original sin in theology. He suggested using the notion of metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) as a concept to reinterpret labor from the standpoint of the organic interrelationship of the human within nature, instead of approaching labor from the standpoint of human intervention in nature for the sake of accumulation of value. This notion of metabolism brings us closer to the Jahwist account of Creation, according to which the mandate to keep and cultivate the garden (Gen 2:15) is addressed to the living creature (*adam*) shaped from the very humus (*adamah*) toward which the efforts of labor are directed.

Such a metabolic comprehension of labor offers the possibility of approaching the problem of justice in such a way that human interests are not separated from the intrinsic rights of nature, including human nature. This organic link is what Martin Luther called the “majesty of matter.” Metabolism opposes a separation between mind and matter that must rightfully be regarded as a “diabolism” characteristic of our sinful condition. The culmination of human use of science and technology for the sake of defending disputed interests is represented in the use of the atomic bomb. Robert Oppenheimer, reflecting about the involvement of scientists in the so-called value-free development of science and technology, rightly said in 1948 that “scientists have known sin.” He was referring to this dramatic case of diabolism. We had arrived at the point of knowing that sin, as the separation from God as the ground of life, can be rendered concretely as the undermining of the very possibility of biological survival.

3. *The Myth of Private Piety*

The third problem that requires repentance and revision is piety itself insofar as it expresses our relationship to the ground of all creation. The great movements of spiritual renewal that have marked Western Christianity since the seventeenth

century (pietism, methodism, puritanism) partake of the same “diabolic” characteristics of modernity in their clear-cut separation between subject and object, grace and nature. The Cartesian dualism is transfigured but not surpassed. Although it is no longer reason but feelings which are the basic criterion for the recognition of grace and truth, it is still the atomized individual that floats over this world by the power of a supernatural faith.

Even if, after Ritschl, we recognize in pietism elements of the mysticism Luther inherited from the *theologia germanica*, new times have brought about some fundamental adjustments from medieval mysticism, particularly in the understanding of nature. We will not find in pietism the view of nature that some mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and others have shown in common. What distinguishes them from pietism, relevant in the context of the ecological crisis, is the appreciation of nature as a place of divine epiphany, as the place God creates to manifest God’s

glory. This is not the natural theology of scholasticism trying to find the logic of God engraved in the laws of nature. In medieval mysticism the point is to approach divine mystery, *qua* mystery, in the creation that surrounds us and envelops its own ground.

The comprehension of nature as the expression of divine mystery, which simultaneously reveals and conceals it, opens up new possibilities for the representation of God. Meister Eckhart, for example, answers Augustine's classical question, What was God doing before creation? without the philosophical anguishes of the bishop of Hippo: God is from all eternity giving birth. It is the attempt to reformulate the problem of revelation using metaphors instead of concepts that distinguishes mysticism from scholasticism. Mysticism finds through nature the reason of the Creator behind the creation. Aside from any difficulties mysticism might present in its ascetism, its importance lies in this insight that nature manifests to reason, in the form of a mystery, the glory of the Creator.

Luther, whose respect for the *theologia germanica* is well known, kept precisely this insight when, in the Heidelberg debate, he distinguished the theology of the cross from the theology of glory. According to him, God is not to be sought as the invisible reality *behind* creation and then defined by the arguments of reason. But God is *in* creation without being creation. Creation is the envelope or the mask (*involucrum* or *larva*) of a God we do not see face to face, but who is communicated in the paradox of contrariness. This notion of the mask or the wrapping of God in which God is—without nature itself being God—lends to nature a sacred dignity without falling into pantheism.

The richness of this image is that it allows us to face nature not as a source of utility, while at the same time not taking it as a direct source of revelation. God remains hidden but definitely present in the opposite. This is a God that paradoxically offers Godself without mediations, but, simultaneously always along with the mediations, indirectly with them. This revelation is the mediated immediacy. It is not given because of the mediations, but never without them. This conception is linked to the mystical comprehension of knowledge by participation in the mystery, and distinguishes itself both from a subjectivist piety, in which there is no mediation for grace—except faith itself, i.e., *fides qua*—as well as from ecclesial orthodoxies where the institutions and the rites are the mediating conditions for grace.

VI. GOD'S WEEPING MASK

Nature *qua* creation is not in itself divine. It is only a mask. But we see now that this mask is weeping and groaning in travail. We don't know where the tears come from, but we know we are responsible for them. The respect due nature does not follow from its merits, but from the intrinsic right of its being, which ultimately sustains human life. Above all it sustains the life of those who are on the edge of existence, beholding an eroding mask which will reveal only the terrifying vision of a naked God. The impulse to redress our ecological consciousness will have to come from those who in powerlessness make community solidarity the only option for survival, who in dispossession experience labor as a metabolism, and who outside of the walls of official religion experience God revealed in the mask of creation.

There is no need to stress that natural processes are normally violent, that the struggle of the species is real, and that survival of the fittest operates at the expense of the weakest. So much we have learned from Darwin. The point that needs to be made addresses the new situation

created in this century. In three or four billion years of evolution and natural tragedies it has never been the case that any species acquired the capability to destroy life as such. This power we now have. This truth is so forceful because the destruction of nature begins with the destruction of the body of the exploited person. *Ecce homo!* Hence we might gain a better insight into the mystery of the Incarnation. The self-emptying of God could not be more radical than the affirmation that God has become a human being in the great variety of the works of creation. Or else, "Consider the lilies of the field."