

Is God green?

Bible and Ecology

Frederic BAUDIN

Introduction

Ecological issues took a real importance in Western countries since about fifty years. In spite of a new attention paid to "nature" thanks to romanticism and science in 19th Century, men and women as a whole did not really anticipate the ecological crisis. But after the Second World War, humanity became aware of the power of destruction of the nuclear weapon and also started to suffer more of the consequences of the pollution generated by the industrial exploitation of the natural resources.

International conferences on environmental protection began with the summit "Only one Earth" organized by the United Nations in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. Then, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created. Twenty years later, in 1992, after several ecological catastrophes which obviously contributed to warn people in many countries, the conference of Rio de Janeiro gathered representatives of 178 States. This summit led to the drafting of conventions on climatic change and the safeguarding of biodiversity. Delegates wrote a programme for a "sustainable development" in the 21th Century, of which principal objectives are: fight against poverty and social exclusion, production of goods and of sustainable services and environmental preservation. Conventions were signed on the basis of former texts, like the Bruntland Report ("Our Common Future », 1987). This text defined the sustainable development and provided the foundations of an urgent action plan for preserving the environment on a worldwide scale.

The assessment of the world Summit for the Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in 2002, was as a whole positive. The Kyoto Protocol (1997), particularly about greenhouse gas emission related to climatic change, was ratified by many States, except United States and Australia, and renewed recently in Bali (2007).

Churches followed this movement by organizing an ecumenical gathering in Vancouver, in 1983, on the topic: "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation", inspired by the German physicist Karl Von Weizsäcker. In 1989, the Conference of European Churches (CEC) invited 650 people in Basel, Switzerland, on the same issue, as later in Graz, Austria, in June 1997. The European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) was set up in 1998. It invites Christian Churches to celebrate a "Time of Creation", with adapted liturgies, from the 1st Sunday of September to the 2nd Sunday of October (see www.ecen.org).

In 1987, the Evangelical Christians signed a "Development Declaration" in Villars, Switzerland. Authors like Francis A. Schaeffer (*Pollution and the death of man*, 1970), or the *Lausanne Committee* since 1974, also alert Evangelicals about the necessity to preserve creation. In 1983, with the support of his eminent colleague John Stott, Peter Harris launched a Christian environmental organization settled first in Portugal, *A Rocha* (the Rock). *A Rocha* actively works in a Christian perspective and stays now in many countries (Lebanon, Kenya, France, Czech Republic, Peru, India, Ghana, etc., see www.arocha.org).

The awakening of the ecological problems deepened among Christians as a whole. No one could affirm today that Churches are not worried about environment safeguarding or sustainable development. But Christians in Churches were not always informed or taught on this subject. The practical application of recommended measures seems difficult, quite utopian and even useless for some who consider that the individual actions in order to protect the environment are lost in the ocean of the ecological problems. They often badly distinguish the specific relationship between their activity and their faith.

The Apostles' Creed is one of the oldest Christian creeds. It starts with these words: "I believe in God, Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth". Like any religious, philosophical or political ideology, faith in God the Creator influences our view on the world, on the men and the women as on any creature. It also influences our way of living in this world.

In the Bible, several verbs are employed to define the *commission* (mandate) addressed by God to humanity. In the first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, three pairs of verbs summarize this mission of cultivating the "garden" in which men and women were put by God in the beginning:

- "To increase in number and to fill the earth".
- "To rule over and subdue" animals, plants and trees, natural resources.
- "To cultivate and keep the garden".

What do these verbs from Genesis mean? What does this commission that God entrusts to humanity consist of? What about the requirements and the limits of the mandate? What are the consequences for the natural environment? Do Christians have a particular responsibility in preserving the environment? And finally, which measures should we take? Which attitude could we adopt to protect our planet?



© F. Baudin, *Sainte-Victoire, Moon Light*

Genèse 1.28

ויברך אתם אלהים ויאמר להם אלהים
 פרו ורבו ומלאו את-הארץ וכבשהו ורדו בדגת הים ובעוף
 השמים ובכל-חיה הרמשת על-הארץ:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (New International Version)

I. Verbs from Genesis

1.1 To increase in number and to fill the earth

פרה	pārāh: to be fruitfull	רבה	rābā: to multiply	מלא	mālēh': to fill
Gn 1.22, 28 ; 9.1: מלא רבה פרה qal <u>imperative</u> => order, mandate					
To increase in number, 10x in Genesis:					
Gn 1.22 (animals)					
Gn 1. 28 ; 8.17 ; 9.1,7 (Human beings) ;					
Gn 17.20 ; 28.3 ; 35.11 ; 47.27 ; 48.4 (Abraham descendants).					

Most of us have heard the biblical saying, *be fruitful and multiply*, but we sometimes wonder just how possible it is to put into practice. For centuries, population growth was very slow. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were one billion people on earth, but by 1930 there were two billion, then four billion by 1975. There are more than six billion since 2000.

This population explosion is partially responsible for the harm done to our present environment. In order to keep-up with an ever-increasing population, it was, of course, necessary to develop the agrarian and industrial sectors of society. These actions have unfortunately created obvious pollution and have upset our ecosystems by interfering with the natural balance of our planet. According to the most conservative estimates, it is believed that world population will reach about eight to ten billion individuals within fifty to one hundred years. It seems possible to feed everyone, if no major climatic or political problems occur.

Of course, the situation is already very unequal in the world. In certain areas, malnutrition is still a reality, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Famine remains a threat, when the climatic conditions are unfavorable or more often when conflicts break out or when food is badly distributed. On the other hand, in our "developed" countries, we largely exceeded the threshold of elementary wellbeing, even if some of our fellow-citizens unfortunately do not always benefit from this abundance.

The challenge today is to find agricultural, industrial, and urban solutions, that will be ecologically viable, and to nourish and shelter, as well as possible, the greatest number of individuals, without slowing down the scientific, technological, economic, social progress. We must also think about the future generations, so, we must ensure a "sustainable development".

1.2 To rule over and to subdue

רָדָה **radâ**: to dominate (Gn 1.28 ; Ps 110.2)

כָּבַשׁ **kābash**: to subdue

We see an excessive domination developing, an unrealistic exploitation of all the natural resources of creation. The consequences of this attitude are sometimes tragic. It is not normal that the yield, which is legitimate, has led farmers to use, often *without calculation or sufficient precautions*, manures and pesticides in abundance, animal flours, antibiotics or growth hormones.

It is not right to use machine power to destroy too much natural spaces: nearly 9 million km² were cleared and transformed since 1850 to meet the needs of increasing population and urbanization. The management of urban and rural space was however not the best. And what about our leisure, our seasonal invasions of the mountains or the beaches which often leave undesirable traces in "nature", in the medium and long term?

It is unfair to develop the industrialization without being aware of the pollution that it can generate. Industrial sites were completely disfigured, soiled, destroyed, by a pollution sometimes mortal. One remembers the dramas of 70'-90' which elicited large waves of protest against excesses of the industrial companies: "black tides" due to shipwreck of tankers Torey Canyon (1967), Amoco Cadiz (1978), Exxon Valdez (1989), Erika (1999), etc. Industrial accidents: Seveso, Italy (1976), Bhopal, India (1984), Chernobyl, Ukraine (1986); Basel, Switzerland (1986), etc. Each year 700 000 new chemicals (natural or synthesis) are indexed in the *Chemical Abstracts* (26 million substances listed, cf www.cas.org), but only approximately 300 000 has been experimented in toxicological studies.

About one million two hundred thousand animals and about five hundred thousand plants has been identified in the world. There are probably four to five times more species (maybe ten times more?). But we are now losing some of richest habitats - the equatorial forest in particular. Hundreds, even thousands of hectares are lost, due to human exploitation every day. We are told that every twenty-four hours, two or three plants or animals become extinct. Among the plants, several have a real medicinal value. Thousands of species risk disappearing in the very near future.

Identified Species (2010)

Animals 1 250 000

Plants 550 000

Threatened species 10 000 to 15 000 (40%)

12% birds

21% mammals

37% fish

70% plants

According to the *Red List* (International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN), 2010. See www.iucn.org

Among the main causes of such premature extinction, we find demographic expansion and pressure, the spread of industrial and residential zones, the draining of wetlands, the abuse of forest exploitation or of pesticides and fertilizers. We could add to that our own bad habits and individual neglect.

One will object however that it was necessary to answer to the population increase. It is easy to formulate, in hindsight, a radical criticism of the demographic and economic growth and its most harmful consequences for men and nature. This assessment can however help us to come back to a better understanding or interpretation of the verbs of Genesis.

To rule over

Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

רָדָה radâ: to take care, to govern
--

In *Genesis*, men and women were invited *to take care* of the garden, of the earth, in communion with God, with love and justice, for the good of all the creatures, for the prosperity of the whole creation, as for the glory of the Creator.

It is what the Hebrew verb (*radâ*) suggests, translated by to dominate or to rule over which is employed on several occasions in the Bible. In *Leviticus*, in particular, Jewish people were reminded in their domestic use of the Law that no one was to dominate his brothers abusively or arbitrarily (Cf. *Leviticus* 25-26). These laws were given to avoid the problems of slavery. The Jewish servants could be redeemed by a member of their family (that is the story of Ruth); they had the possibility of recovering freedom at the time of the sabbatical year, every seven years. The Hebrew prophets use the same verb, *radâ*. They reminded the king that he should use his position for the good of his people, like a shepherd over his sheep, and not in a tyrannical way.

It means to dominate the earth as human beings created in the image of God, as the Church Fathers specify it on the basis of the Greek translation of the Bible (the Septuagint): Hebrew *radâ* is translated by the Greek *árkhō*, which remains the capacity to order, to exert the chief function, with all the necessary qualities! Psalm 8 echoes with this text: the verb root "to govern" (מָשַׁל) illustrate the quality of this domination, characterized by wisdom and intelligence.

Psalm 8. 6-8

"You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas."

To subdue

כָּבַשׁ kābash: to subdue (Greek <i>katakuriéūō</i> : to become Master), to trample (down), to crush, => to take possession on permission of the sovereign, in order to manage a territory.

Lastly, the Hebrew verb *kābash* means subdue and also "to take possession", as we can also understand in the old Middle East literature (letters of Thutmès III, Egypt, 18th dynasty, 1505-1450 BC, and Sargon II, Assyria, 722-705 BC), when the king gives his governor the authority "to subdue" his territory in order *to manage it*. In the *Genesis* context, that means that the man and the woman are called to manage creation well, with the wisdom, the intelligence and the control that God grants them in order to exercise their mandate.

1.3 To cultivate and keep the “garden”

Genesis 2.15

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

עבד 'ābad to cultivate שמר šamar to keep => material and religious, spiritual meaning

- To keep God's **commandments** (Dt 4.2; 10.13, etc.), **Sabbath** (Dt 5.12), **feast** (Ex 23.15), **Alliance** (Gn 17.9), one's **Soul** (Dt 4.9; Ps 25.20)
- To cultivate, to work, **to worship, to serve God** (priests in the temple: Ex 10.26, Nb 3.7, 4.23,24,30,47; 8.11-22, etc.)

In Hebrew, the verbs to cultivate and to keep (*āvad* and *šamar*) also have a spiritual meaning. The semantical relation is not obvious, but it is not excluded from reading in this linguistic relationship an encouragement to consider our activity beyond the simple material realities. The verb to cultivate implies to serve, to work for, to worship God. One keeps the Commandments of God, the alliance of God, the Sabbath, his soul, his heart. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the priests were to “work”, to be keepers of the sanctuary and to worship God, to preserve the purity of the holy place. So, this kind of domination implies man's responsibility, both human and spiritual, as we are called to fill, to cultivate and to keep the earth.

II Limits of human activity

2.1 Biblical Laws

In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in particular in the statement of blessings and curses, a close link is underlined between obedience to God, good climate, the fertility of the ground, the abundance of harvests, and finally, as a logical consequence, the worship which one returns to God at the time of the crops festivals (Pessa'h, Shavouôt, Soukkhôt = Passover, Pentecost, and Tents Feast).

That means that all the creation is interdependent and by his faith in God and his good management of the earth, the human being ensures the preservation of the whole of creation.

That however remains an ideal to be reached; because sin or evil is still a reality in our world. But it remains true that if men and women respected these priorities imposed *for their good* by the Creator, then the situation of the earth and all its living creatures and resources would be in a much better position.

"If man obeyed his God, he would be a blessing for the earth. But because of his greed, his short-sighted pride, he pollutes and destroys it, he makes of the garden a desert... "

Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, InterVarsity Press (November 1984).

2.2 Time and money

In his book, *Pollution and the death of man* (1970), Francis A. Schaeffer analyzes the link between time and money, a problem which he considers as a key to adopt a coherent Christian attitude: "As Christians, we have to learn to say, 'Stop!' Because, after all, greed (cupidity) is destructive against nature at this point, and there is a time to take one's time."

"Time is money!" This proverb has caused many problems and disorders in our world. It can be legitimate to see in nature a sequence of causes and effects that we need to understand well in order to manage it better. But if this vision remains purely mechanist, without any reference to God, without any ethical well defined rule, the danger is to manage badly and to destroy creation.

Indeed, the will to dominate nature, in order to get the greatest and the quickest benefit, greed, the abusive love of money pushes men to force the limits of time and nature. He might even go as far as modifying inner structures of matter or of living beings. But he doesn't always have control of these changes, and the consequences may be disorders, pollution of the ground and the oceans, the loss of biodiversity. Thus the ground is abused by the tyranny of an unhealthy domination and an excessive exploitation of animal, vegetable and mineral resources.

Profit is legitimate, but it has its limits, just like the economic growth, which certainly reveals a moving world, an increasing world. But it should not dominate our spirit and our behavior. It is also necessary to take rest, with confidence in God: "*There is a time to take one's time...*"

The Sabbath: Exodus 20.8-11 (NIV)

זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֹאכֶתָּהּ: וְיְוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֵלֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָל־מְלֹאכֶתָּהּ אַתָּה וּבִנְיָוֶהָ עֶבֶד וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ וּגְרָם אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (NIV)

The people of Israel were to observe the Sabbath, one day per week, and not to work this day. Rest was for these men and these women a sign of their dependence on the Lord, of their faith in God to provide for their needs even while they rested. They knew that they were creatures limited in time and space. They were to respect their limits as well as those of the other creatures, including the animals which they worked with. They had also to rest during this day out of love and respect for God, the Lord of creation, and they worshiped him.

Even the ground was "to enjoy its Sabbaths", to rest in order to be more fertile. But when God's rules were transgressed, the country literally "vomited" its inhabitants (Lv 18.27). The biblical image is clear! The ground won't endure the abuse of men, it undergoes the effect of their disobedience to the Law of God, and it becomes sick.

Men can thus dominate and subdue creation only if they remain themselves dominated by the Lord, subjected to God, and that implies they answer his invitation to rest, with confidence (faith). We know that rest helps us to step back so that we can have renewed minds and physical strength. It is also a good way to be better managers of the earth. The call to trust God and to be responsible for good management of creation is also expressed in the New Testament.

- **Respect of limits** : “The land “enjoys” (רצה) its sabbath years” Lv 25.2 ; 26. 34,43
- **Transgression of limits** : The land vomits out (קיא) its inhabitants Lv 18. 25,28 ; 20.22.

2.3 General Revelation and human responsibility

Romans 1. 20-23 (NIV)

“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles”.

As Paul the apostle suggests at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, the Creator has left his mark, his autograph on the world. This revelation of God in nature is incomplete, but men and women created in the image of God can at least recognize, in the world around, and in themselves, the print of God.

That even renders them, underlines Paul, indefensible (*anapologogétous*) not to have glorified God. This revelation establishes their responsibility and reveals, in some way, their fault: They went so wrong in their reasoning that instead of serving God, they served the creation. Instead of dominating over fishes, birds and reptiles says Paul (Genesis 2), men and women are reduced to serve, to work for, to adore, to worship these creatures. This is idolatry.

It is really the case for some people linked to the New Age movement which borrows from the pagan religions the worship of the Gaia goddess, the divinized Earth, to justify a kind of spiritual ecology. The paradox is more obvious when man considers himself to be god, he adores his own image. The risk then is to scorn, to neglect, to impoverish, even to destroy creation as a whole. Because man, when he wants to free himself from God by serving the creation instead of the Creator, the man who believes himself wise, underlines Paul, is actually foolish, insane!

The faults, the sins Paul denounces then in his letter to the Romans shows the claim of man to cross the limits of his human condition, both spiritual and practical, in all the fields of life: family, sexuality, economy... However, faith in God and respect of the limits set by the Lord, is the best way to avoid disproportionate exploitation of creation. It is also a good way to avoid the idolatry denounced by the prophets and the apostles.

“Man belongs to this creation, but he carries a presence of God there. He could often say he is managing creation for God... Man is a Lieutenant of God in creation... He should not manage this creation for power and domination, but as a representative of the love of God.”

Jacques Ellul, *Man and Creation* (in *Foi et Vie, Écologie et Théologie*, Rodes, Ellul, Charbonneau, etc., n° 5-6, december 1974).

III Whose Responsibility?

3.1 Christians and the ecological crisis

In a "Science" magazine article (1967), Lynn White Jr. affirms that Christians took a particular responsibility in the ecological crisis. In fact, It is true that Christian civilization since the sixteenth century, and our Western civilization as a whole has not always been a model, individual and collective, of good management of nature.

It is very easy to denounce the drifts of a consumer society, particularly in our countries of Christian tradition which wanted to dominate, to control nature, and to contribute to the economic, scientific and technological progress, at the same time neglecting biblical teaching to define a healthy ethic of creation and its exploitation.

In this case, Christians are of course responsible for the ecological crisis. They misused nature and allowed it to be degraded most of time without reacting. They did not practice justice: we must remember that only 20% of the world's countries, the richest ones, use 80% of the world resources. Prosperity Theology, preached primarily in North America, is an insult toward the poor Christians of South countries, a negation of the love and justice of God for all...

We remember that Jesus himself "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8.9), and that among "Heroes of the Faith" mentioned in letter to the Hebrews, some have "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised" but others "faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11.33-38, NIV).

The true blessing of God is his presence at any time, when all is well (be thankful, generous and vigilant !) and when all is going wrong (be confident in God, persevere in prayer and in patience...), in any case, faith is required to overcome the temptation of domination or anger, to be stronger than those difficulties and to try to find a solution...

We could however mention more positive examples: religious communities like the Mennonites or the Amish, maintained another relationship with nature, more respectful of human and natural limits, more critical in terms of technological progress. But are these examples adapted for a greatest number, in particular in the event of large population growth?

3.2 Non-Christians

The same evaluation could also be drawn up for various civilizations or countries under the influence of other religions or governed by philosophical or ideological principles different from Christianity.

The Buddhist or Shinto countries, considered as more attentive to nature, have in many cases fallen into the same problems as the Western countries (Japan).

Countries with a political ideology such as Communism in the USSR and in the countries of Eastern Europe or in China have also subdued nature in conformity with their economic plans: the ecological situation of these countries is often disastrous.

The countries of the South, whether they be under animism, Islam, Hinduism, or possibly Christianity, still sometimes see their environment being degraded for other reasons. These are due to poverty, to the lack of financial means or suitable legislation to fight against pollution.

Ecological and philosophical movements, such as the nebulous and syncretistic New-Age movement, preach a respect of nature which seems very admirable. But it is actually inspired by a pantheist and Eastern vision of nature, which is very different from the biblical doctrine.

Most radical is the *Deep Ecology* Movement, which underlines that measures proposed for environment preservation remain too superficial, not only on a philosophical but also on a practical level. According to this group, if man could disappear, it should be a good thing to preserve biodiversity since he is the principal cause of the disorders in nature... But that is not a solution... Neither human, nor Christian... God is a God of life, for everyone.

The Christians' Theocentrism should protect them from excessive domination or "centrism" exclusively centered on man or nature. The Christian point of view embodies a project of life for this present world, even if the Christians are not always the best witnesses! Finally, we all are concerned with the question of preserving the environment.

3.3 We all are concerned

Many Christians, like non-Christians, sometimes live with the more or less conscious thought, that natural resources are limitless, that biological diversity does not seem to suffer from an impoverishment; that humanity will be able to adapt to the new living conditions, even to pollution! They argue with conviction that there will be a solution and they believe that man is worth much more than a flower, a bird, a fish, or a snake.

Of course, men and women are precious creatures; we are right to look for the spiritual salvation and human wellbeing of everyone around us or around the world. But we seek precisely, as Christians, to protect this creation through which God appears, this creation that we have to manage like good managers called by their creator.

Our natural and energy reserves are limited: drinking water is lacking in many areas of the world; many resources like oil or uranium are not inexhaustible. In spite of real efforts to reduce it, pollution often crosses the limits of intolerable (and it also crosses borders!). So, what do we need to do to approach the ideal of sustainable development?

We need to change our behavior, to live in moderation. We can try to save our resources. We can protect the natural heritage which is entrusted to us, and thus, we can think of the future generations... We share this responsibility to manage our natural inheritance well, along with the whole of humanity, with everyone engaged in all fields: political authorities, industrialists, researchers and biologists, farmers, and the consumers, who we all are! We are all called to practice the "cultural mandate", as it is called by theologians. This mandate is addressed to humanity as a whole. Everyone has to answer this call of God to fill, to dominate and to cultivate the earth...

Conclusion : what motivates us?

We pointed out first that we believe in God as Creator. That influences our view on the world: every human being is of some nationality, color of skin or social condition, and any man or woman created with the image of God is worthy of our respect, in all the areas of life.

Since the beginning, God has invited humanity to fill, dominate, cultivate and keep the earth, to take care of it. We all are concerned, Christians and non Christians, by this universal vocation, particularly in these days when the planet is threatened more and more by our bad management of its resources. We know that from now on we should change our way of life, to return to a better management, more balanced, more equitable.

How will we bring about this motivation to change, this motivation to live moderately, with justice towards the poorest. Where will we draw the desire to transmit a natural inheritance which makes it possible for the future generations to live in the best conditions? In the *fear* of an irreversible destruction of nature, a new world war, a nuclear one, or a major industrial accident? Of global warming? Of the global economical conflict? It is not sure, as so many "ecologists" try to let us think, that the fear is the best motivation to encourage us to change our way of life.

All that is possible, even if we believe that God, who is sovereign, preserves the world, despite everything... But it seems that beyond the responsibility that one could ascribe to Christians in the ecological crisis, beyond a certain acknowledgement of failure, at least partial, the Christian faith can however inspire us and lead us in another more positive way. In so far as we quite simply seek, as Christians, to be *confident* in God as Creator and as our Father, a God concerned about his whole creation, a green God, to be sure! And especially in so far as we can put our faith into practice.

We believe that the very whole creation is worthy of our care, because it reveals something of God, it bears his imprint. He loves his creation. He considers it to be good, even very good, in spite of man's sin, his betrayal or his claim to be able to live without him... This God whom we call "our Father", leaves us the freedom to, at the very least, define a healthy ethic of creation, in order to better discern and know the limits of our action in the world. We are invited, in particular, to consider our position in time and space, but also on financial means and techniques which we employ to dominate the world, extraordinary means, but also frightening. We must also think about our link on natural resources and our consumption...

We can do it in communion with God, at least up to a certain point, since we believe that Jesus-Christ came to offer us reconciliation and thus to live a first impression of what will one day be a new world... To live differently, therefore, is a challenge in conformity with the calls of the prophets and of the apostles, and of Jesus himself, who came into our world, as true man and true God, to save it. We have there an extraordinary occasion to give our Christian testimony in this world where men who live without God believe themselves wise and however act like fools. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to follow them (or to precede them?) on this dangerous road, instead of proposing an alternate way of living, a more reasonable way.

Undoubtedly, this challenge will also reveal our weaknesses and our contradictions, that our contemporaries will again not fail to denounce or underline, but we should face these difficulties resolutely! Moreover, the ecological challenge as a whole is in many respects a source of frustration, of challenges sometimes impossible to hold, disappointing assessments, a Utopia which could take religious forms, perhaps even next the great universal Utopia?

However Christians know well that it there no (and never will be) “perfect” ecology. We do not believe that man will be able, in any way, to establish the reign of God on earth, through his intelligence, his skill technical, or even his measures to protect the environment or to ensure a sustainable development.

The earth "sighs while groaning" (Romans 8), the whole creation awaits the final restoration. Our ethical and responsible management of nature will ensure only a partial improvement. God alone remains sovereign to regenerate this earth, "to create a new heaven and a new earth".

We continue for our part to denounce the reality of evil, the Utopia of progress, of productivity, or of ecology which would deliver us from this evil which remains in the heart of man. That should not finally prevent us from fighting evil in all its forms, and from taking care of the earth as we take care of our body every day although it is mortal –the “end of time” is not a good reason to avoid our responsibility–, from being sensitive to our environment, an authentic Christian point of view.

it is possible to return to a more sober life style. We can reduce our consumption of gasoline, electricity, drinking water, of food, pesticides, leisure, and so on. We can do this without putting the development or the growth of our world in danger.

In the name of God, mandated by the Lord, we can be as good managers as possible, responsible, moderate. We can give according to our priorities, because we lay importance on what we are, more than on what we have. Thus we shall be able to better protect nature, to preserve this earth which is given to us to share.. And we must remember that it will also allow us to better perceive the partial revelation of God in nature.

We are called to cultivate and keep the garden, to discern the limits of our human activity, in communion with God. Because to take care of creation, in this present time, it is also a way of loving God and our neighbor...

Frédéric Baudin
© CEM 2007 - 2010
www.cemfrance.org

© Translation: F. Baudin, J. Risnes, P. Berning



Practical solutions

It seems possible to implement at least three measures for better dominating and subduing the creation, in a human and in a Christian way.

First, we can resist the temptations of our modern civilization:

- the temptation to exceed our limits, of living at an inhuman pace
- the temptation of greed, love of money and the other materialistic idolatries (Colossians 3:5)
- the thirst for disproportion. But scientific research often leads us to cross some limits in order to find new solutions... So, we must be wise and ask God for wisdom
- the temptation of unrestrained consumerism, promoted by advertising which entices us, fashion, the traps of leisure...
- the temptation of an excessive domination of nature due to increasingly powerful and effective technology... We can easily reduce our useless consumption...

Secondly, In order to accomplish that goal it will necessary to use our intelligence, to exercise our mind, our human and spiritual understanding, to discern limits, and not to be afraid to call into question dominant models. We can express our specific Christian voice, not an appeal based on *fear*, but a confident one, based on the faith in God, our Creator and Saviour in Jesus-Christ.

We need to ingenious in order to find durable solutions, and Christians have sometimes contributed to it... It seems good, for example, to promote renewable energy sources (solar, wind, hydro-electricity, etc.). But this also not the panacea, the miracle solution. Even biofuel causes problems that we need to know better and perhaps solve. Nuclear energy will probably remain indispensable, but what about nuclear danger and waste? It is thus important to support research in order to better control it. But we need first to save oil or gas, especially if we want the future generations to use this kind of miraculous oil molecular...

Lastly, we need to encourage environmental education, in particular for the young people, in our churches within the framework of catechism or Sunday School, for example, or in a Christian association. In nineteen eighty three (1983), with the support of his eminent colleague John Stott, the Anglican Minister Peter Harris launched a Christian organization of environmental protection, *A Rocha*, initially in Portugal, which is now present in 20 countries. It is also good to debate about this topic in our Churches. Maybe we will find solutions together...

Ex-cursus: Christian Eschatology and Ecology

Christians have a vision of the world, men and environment, specific to the faith in God the Creator. They regard men and the women as beings created with the image of God, and thus worthy of respect. They seek what is good and beautiful to give full weight to the ethical dimension of life. Their will to protect the environment is based on the faith in God who *appears*, at least partly, through his creation. Their glance also turns to the world to come, because they believe that God will one day renew this creation: their current responsibility is not without consequences on the world to come. However, the question of "the final times" remains delicate, both in a theological and philosophical way. One can distinguish, without always being separated, two principal visions of the future.

Paradise of "men-gods"

Several materialistic and spiritual streams converge on this point: man is building a better future on earth, he will establish a "golden age", with or without God's assistance. The atheistic evolutionism includes chance and necessity screened through natural selection; it considers progress as resulting from a system of dialectical mechanics where the "evil" is the "engine" of history; positivism is triumphing and the human industry is enlightened by a rational and saving scientism suitable for the modern age.

Spiritualistic evolutionism integrates a transcendent dimension in this process, a "divine presence", a personal or impersonal force. From Gnosticism and Neoplatonism into the first centuries of Christian era to the "Process theology" at the XXe century, the influence of this spiritualistic thought remains very sensitive. The "New Age" movements which take as a starting point the Sixties hippie culture, are enthusiastic promoters: they assimilate and synthesize the philosophical and religious traditions, of which animism is sometimes set up as a model.

Mystical, philosophical or religious traditions and pantheism occupy a very particular place in this movement: "God" is generally an universal, impersonal intelligence-conscience which spreads out in all the components of the universe, in order to carry it, in spite of the upheavals and the most unforeseeable and destructive "jumps", towards an ultimate goal under the effect of a "upward movement", an increasing evolution and complex processes and organizations.

For some, transcendence is a power in the beginning distinct from humanity, which animates it and inspires it in a movement leading to the fusion of all beings, the descent of the One spreading itself in the multiple and to the rise of the multiple which turns over to the One; for others, it is immanent in man who "invents" it himself, according to his ideals, in order to evolve to a higher type of humanity. In other words, man gives himself "good reasons" to exceed his "gravities" in order to rise with the row of god; this "transcendence" is thus all immanent! Certain Christians are more sensitive to their immanence, copied on the model of the Christ-Man. Divine transcendence is thus thought of as establishing the kingdom of God on earth by the practical application of an ethics inspired by love, with multiple social applications.

Neoplatonician Philosophers and the Gnostic or mystical stream and even theological like *the Theology Process* have undeniable common points and affinities with this evolutionary, dialectical and fusion design, especially in our modern and postmodern age: the notion of "God" is held in the history of the universe and men by subjecting itself to the chances and the sudden starts of the evolution, while concentrating on itself and being reduced until being erased, to become an integral part of humanity and the world, of the "creation" which is completed by the progressive irrigation of its presence.

From Spinoza to Einstein, Feuerbach, Baur and Ritschl to Hans Jonas and Michel Serre, from the Cabbale to the Vedas, with nuances and from some very different points of view, this "heaven" which *merges* with the "earth", this world-God in becoming is a widespread notion... Little in this philosophy is compatible with Christian theology and hope, and it is confronted by a radical distinction between this "earth" and "paradise", sometimes quite as foreign to the Biblical vision of the world to come.

Paradise of "heaven"

The dualistic - often naive - concept of "paradise" or "heaven" opposed to this "world" or this "earth" remains very present in our Christian culture, as in other religions or philosophies, where it exists in various forms.

It is indeed a current idea to radically dissociate the "heaven" of the "earth". Myths of the golden age, before or after our time, the concept of "paradise" excluding any reference to the present creation, the luminous world beyond the cave even foreseen by Plato, the badly matched matter-spirit couple continues to distort our Christian vision of the future. One idea derived from Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, philosophies which often influenced Christian thought, has persisted and that is the notion of a "heaven" or a disembodied "kingdom of God", free from any evil matter, the place of pure, bodiless spirits.

The points of contact are numerous with the Eastern religions and philosophies which regard the material world as an illusion, to emphasize the spiritual world, which is superior. During his life on earth, the human being must escape the infernal cycle of reincarnations and be absorbed in the "whole" or "non-existence", in order to escape suffering and to arrive at fullness of life. This often results in a fatalistic attitude, a lack of interest for the life, a lack of appreciation for "things below" and consequently, an unquestionable negligence for cultivating and managing this earth.

A "case with share": the Intelligent Design

Certain Christians, particularly in the United States, have tried to harmonize the theories of the evolution and their faith in a Creator. They worked out the theory of *Intelligent Design*, which is also promoted by non-Christians fascinated by the astronomical positioning, biological structure or simply the "beauty of nature". For all of them, God or a higher intelligence is at the origin of life, he controls the evolution of the universe and gradually leads it to its completion, to perfection. This theory is attractive when it integrates the most widely respected scientific data on evolution (which is not always the case), but it does not "prove" anything however; neither about God himself, nor in the scientific field.

One reproaches *Intelligent Design* for being used as a guarantee for creationism set up as a system of thought to be taught on the same level as the theories of the evolution. Truth and falsehood mix here to make more confused the traditional Christian position: the Christians all believe in a Creator, even if they do not all agree with each other about the way –and in particular the duration of time in which– God created the world. Belief in a Creator is a matter of faith! When we are filled with the wonder of beauty, indubitable harmony, the possibility even of the life and its diversified development on earth: It is right, for Christians, to subscribe to the biblical assertion: "By faith we believe that God created the worlds" (Hebrew 11).

By "creationists", however, one generally understand the Christians convinced that God created the world in six days, according to a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis. Other

Christians, are convinced that God "has created all things, but that he controls them and leads them, setting out and regulating according to his will all that happens in the world", according to the Calvin's formula. So they prefer to respect the most proven scientific data introducing us into a dimension of time –several billion years– which does not contradict in any way faith in a Creator, God for whom "a thousand years are like one day". For the beginning as for the end of time, Christians have different points of view: may that not be a pretext for impulsive divisions, often unjustified!

A Christian vision of the future: "heaven" on earth, between rupture and continuity

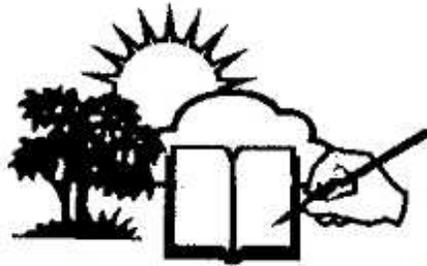
Old Testament and New Testament Authors point the fact that God and his creation are distinct. Human beings or other creatures cannot be confounded with God who makes a *covenant* with man. God and humanity are like a Lord with his vassal, a chief with his subordinates whom he loves and respects.

It is possible to be in *communion* with God. Christians believe that God restored communion with humanity through Jesus, his Son, thanks to his death and resurrection. Jesus the Messiah gave his life to cover and cancel our transgressions: this is the meaning of the Hebrew word *expiation* (kpr). Jesus offers himself "as a ransom" to redeem us, to pay the debt for our sins before God. Finally, the "Lamb of God" is also the "High Priest": Jesus rose from the grave and became the mediator of a new covenant between God and his people. His is our advocate to plead our cause and to obtain for us the grace of God his Father (cf. Letter to the Hebrews). Then, God grants his Spirit to those who believe in him. Men and women can reject evil and seek peace with God in order to have life, finding God's forgiveness in Jesus his Son. They can know God as their "Father" and live with him as adopted sons and daughters through Jesus the "only begotten Son". They are still distinct from God. *Communion* does not mean *confusion*. That is a great difference with the pantheistic thought of the New Age movements.

God's people are not yet in the "new creation", even if Christians are "new creatures" right now, or literally (in Greek) "a new *creation* in Jesus-Christ" (2 Corinthians 5.17). This tension between present and future is specific to the Christian faith. Some Christians insist on the last judgment as the "destruction of earth by fire" (2 Peter 3), the "end of the world" when all would disappear, and say: "why should we protect the earth?"

The end times started two thousand years ago, as stated by Jesus and his disciples. Discontinuity between the old and the new creation is not so radical. Of course, we can find it in the Bible, as Jesus himself underlines it. When Jesus comes again, it will be a deliverance as well as a judgment, a kind of "purifying fire". But the Bible speaks also about *continuity* between this corruptible creation and the new incorruptible creation to come, already revealed in Jesus-Christ raised from the death. The final resurrection Day will be a new start for nature, the earth will be transformed, regenerated, renewed, recreated... by God.

God is the Lord of the whole of the creation which is called, with God's elected sons and daughters, to complete restoration (Romans 8. 18-23). Right relationships between creatures and Creator shall be restored. God declared all his creation *good*. The Bible also insists on new creation: a spiritual regeneration already starts for everyone who believes in Jesus the risen Son of God. But the new creation is also the hope of resurrection with incorruptible bodies, in communion with the Lord. While waiting for this final redemption, the "end" is not a pretext: we can take care of the earth as we do for our mortal body, each day...



Culture - Environnement - Médias



© F. Baudin, Sainte-Victoire, Aurores

CEM

[fb @ cemfrance.org](https://www.facebook.com/cemfrance.org)

www.cemfrance.org



A ROCHA



www.arocha.org