

**Daniel PASTIRČÁK:**

## **To Own, to Surrender and to Administrate: Christianity and Ecology**

It is in my opinion almost impossible to start a discourse on the relationship between Christianity and ecology in any other way than by a little explanation of a great misunderstanding. The accusation that the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition is responsible for the ecological crisis of the industrial society has become an indispensable weapon of certain rather radical Green groups. The idea contained in the Biblical book of Genesis that humanity has been entrusted with rule over the created world is, according to this view, responsible for the attitude of exploitation and destruction of modern humanity towards nature. This great “story” of evil Christianity and Western civilization has not been invented by the activists themselves; rather it has been taken over from renowned authors connected to the New Age movement. It is obvious that an analysis of this great green myth would require an essay of a much broader scope than the one presented. The following lines are therefore nothing but a little comment.

### **Enchantment and Estrangement**

Morris BERMAN, one of the renowned thinkers connected to the New Age, comments on this relationship in his book *The Reenchantment of the World* in the following way: “During more than 99% of the history of humanity the world was enchanted. Humans perceived themselves as an integral part of the world. A total elimination of this perception within the time span of no more than 400 years broke the continuity of the human experience and the integrity of the human soul.”

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BERMAN's book was published in 1984. If we deduct the mentioned 400 years we reach the year 1584. It was in those times that the dominant position of the Church and the civilizational role of Christianity started to lose ground. The Renaissance joined the discussion, stating that not God but humanity is the measure of all things which subsequently facilitated the criticism of religion by the Enlightenment and later the positivist mystification of scientific knowledge.

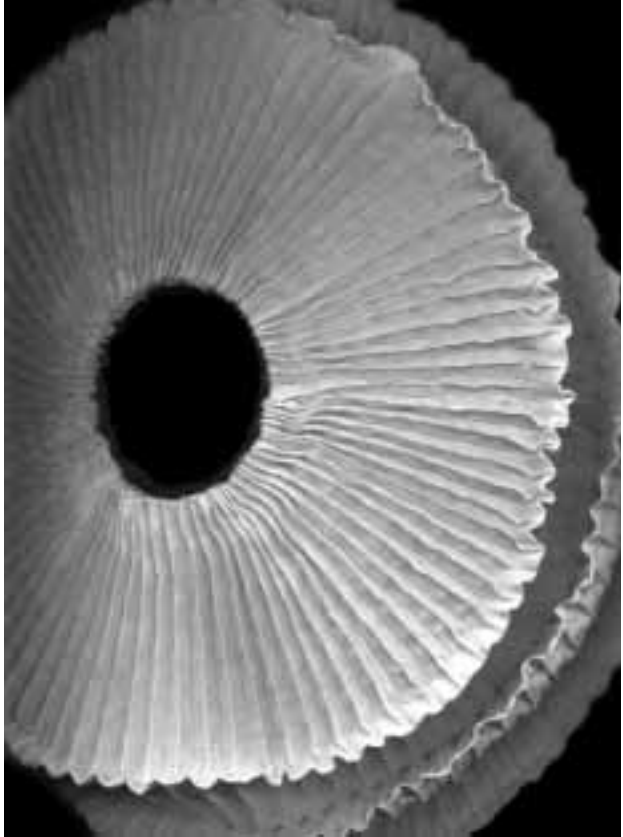
But what had been happening until this time? What was happening between the years 300 and 600 when Christianity had the best opportunity to devastate the countries she had entered by means of her destructive ideology? According to Morris BERMAN, the world was enchanted in this period. Yes it was, even if it was Christian (with its positive and negative elements). The Hebrew story of the dominant Adam, however, had been forming the human civilization for one millennium before Christ already. The Christianity merely inherited this "destructive" story from the Jews.

Was the society of the Israelites, in which the priests, prophets, kings and rabbis considered this same story sacred for centuries, really so cruel and exploitative towards its immediate environment? Morris BERMAN included those places and times without any further hesitation into those 99% of the human history, in which the world remained enchanted. And he was right. Then, however, the problem of the estrangement of humanity from nature appears in a different light. The date when the estrangement started to develop is the date of the secularization of the Western world. If there is an idea that can be made responsible for the estrangement of modern humanity from nature it can be to a great extent the humanistic idea that humans are the measure of all things.

### **Mythological or Scientific?**

The interpretation of the Biblical story by Francis BACON is often cited as the reason for criticism of the Judeo-Christian concept of humanity. Francis BACON is considered one of the thinkers that laid the foundations of modern scientific thought. Here we encounter a typical paradox that is often present in criticism of Christian thought: Marxist philosophers distance themselves from Christianity since it is based on mythology and in conflict with the scientific methods of the acquisition of knowledge; and ecological philosophers reject Christianity because it laid the foundations of modern science.

Both the former and the latter are partly right, but a deep understanding of Christianity is possible only when these two elements are seen in balance. Trying to adapt Christianity to new streams of thought, several modern liberal theologians accepted the optics of the materialist positivism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The criticism of ecological philosophers



rightly concerns this kind of Christian thinker. Those Christian thinkers, however, that have remained faithful to the orthodox interpretation, were among the first to criticize the attitude of modern humanity towards nature. The well-known modern poet and Christian thinker T. S. ELIOT presented in his book *The Idea of a Christian Society* (published in 1939) the following ideas:

“We may say that religion, as distinguished from modern paganism, implies a life in conformity with nature. It may be observed that the natural and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with mechanistic. We are being made aware that the organization of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both to

the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly. A wrong attitude towards nature implies somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and that the consequence is an inevitable doom." T. S. ELIOT is, by the way, frequently quoted by the eco-philosopher H. SKOLIMOVSKI, although the meaning of ELIOT's words is slightly altered in his works.

### **Environmental Darwinism**

I believe that the mentioned story of the first human and the Garden of Eden can be a source of fruitful inspiration for the discussion about the relationship between humanity and nature. It seems to represent an interesting alternative. On one side of the table there are Enlightenment humanists with their classical positivist paradigm. Their view of the issue can be denoted as environmental Darwinism.

In their vision of the cosmos, humanity is the peak of evolution. In humanity, the evolution of matter reached the kind of complexity that gave rise to the phenomenon of consciousness. In humanity the cosmos starts to be aware of itself. The god of the evolutionary cosmos is human. For this reason humans are entitled to use the cosmos in the way that suits them. The world seen through this kind of glasses appears to be a collection of natural resources.

Our environment represents a huge storehouse of energies, materials and foods, which are at the disposal of humanity and can be consumed. Humans own nature and subjugate it through the power of their intellect. A collective version of this attitude was the attempt of communism; the individualist version is capitalism. Those who identify with this concept of the world are willing to reflect on the problem of their relationship with nature as it is in their interest to sustain human life and civilization in the future.

The arguments are then connected with the issues of exhaustion and sustainability of natural resources. For numerous thinkers this approach does not represent a starting point for ecological thinking as it does not change the attitude of humanity towards nature in its essence but only confirms the arrogant anthropological principle.

### **Environmental Pantheism**

On the other side of the table another group of thinkers have taken their places, including those, whose agenda tries to avoid the one-sidedness of environmental Darwinism. Their attitudes can be denoted as environmental pantheism. Contrary to the older idea that everything is matter they claim that everything is spirit (an "old and new" idea). The cosmos is a self-

conscious organism, nature as a whole is God. All its parts are equally divine; all its elements are of equal value and are parts of a unique living whole. This approach is an evident enrichment. It modifies the attitude of humanity towards nature in a radical way. It helps humans to spread their empathy over the realm of animals, plants, hills, etc. It teaches us to think the way a hill thinks.

The intrinsic peril of this approach is, however, that it can evolve into an ecological romanticism. When trying to perceive the world from other beings' perspective (e.g. animals' and plants') humans cannot avoid remaining human and the only inner world humans truly know is their own human self. Humans cannot become a tree or a wolf, can only personify them and humanize beings that in reality are not human. This vision contains certain limitations and thus in certain steps will not be able to be the best advisor in the area of relating to nature.

Firstly, nature (as God) knows neither sympathy nor mercy. The stronger devour the weaker to renew life energies within themselves. If God is identical with nature there is no reason why humans should limit themselves in the name of their relationship with other living creatures (humans, animals or plants). Asceticism in the name of sympathy and mercy is not understandable in the middle of a world in which the primary law is the fight for survival. In this connection I cannot help mentioning PASCAL's idea that one deed based on mercy is greater than the whole of cosmos as it does not belong to the natural order of things but to the supernatural.

Secondly, if humans are equally positioned parts of the organism of nature as stones, grasses, trees or bears, we cannot require from them greater responsibility than from a stone, grass, tree or from a bear. Pantheism ignores the qualitative difference between humans and other creatures of the planet. But (in this point are the environmental Darwinists unfortunately right) humans have power with which they dominate over other creatures. Who is the stronger mammal: a human or a lion? From the physiological point of view certainly the lion. But humanity has creative consciousness and can invent the bow and arrow or the rifle. Humans have an advantage of which they must be aware and which must be admitted. Humans can exert dominance – a fact which requires an attitude of responsibility.

## Garden of Eden

In this instance the story of the Garden of Eden comes in with an intriguing alternative. In this story God creates Adam. The Hebrew word Adam means earthly – the one taken from the earth. It refers to the fundamental kinship of humanity with all other creatures of the cosmos. We are made

from the parts of the same mosaic, from the same atomic dust. If God is our father, the Earth is our mother. When St. FRANCIS of Assisi addressed trees and animals as sisters and brothers, he was not using a metaphor. From the Christian perspective we are all sisters and brothers of the whole created world.

God creates Adam in his own image. The story reveals in what sense humanity is the image of God. Humanity has creative consciousness. God creates the world by God's Word, Adam names the world by his words. Through names Adam creates the fundament of his consciousness and his consciousness becomes the tool by means of which he completes for himself what was created by God. The limited consciousness of humanity is a mirror of the absolute consciousness of God. Adam is given free will.

In the Biblical story the possibility of choice is symbolized by the tree of knowledge of the good and evil. God's absolute freedom is reflected in the relative freedom of humanity. Humanity is also created as a diune being. In his sleep Adam is divided to become a woman and a man, so that these two may form one being in their mutual love. Christianity has the vision of God as a triune being. God's essence is love – the Loved One, the Loving One and the Spirit of Love. Human being reflects God as a Being of Love in its ability to transcend its own ego and to unite with another ego in an I and Thou relationship.

### **Administrating the World**

Humanity understood in this way is in the story incorporated into a relationship with nature. Nature is symbolized by the Garden of Eden. The garden does not belong to humanity but to God. Humanity is not the owner of the garden but just an administrator. Nature is not a mine supplying raw materials for human desires. As administrators, humans are responsible to the Lord of the garden. They shall cultivate it and take care of it. They bear responsibility for the dominance they were given in the form of creative consciousness.

The story of humanity in the Garden of Eden continues with the story of the temptation and deformation of humans. They move from love to ego-centrism. They succumb to the temptation of placing themselves at the centre of the universe. Instead of administrating the world, they pretend to own it. The image of God in humanity has been distorted.

This fact is inherently present in our civilization. It reflects equally our glory as well as our meanness. Everything we create is both a yes and a no. Our tireless creativity produces remarkable and partial improvements, which carry in themselves a sort of evil that will have to be faced by future generations. This is the Biblical image of our humanity, of contradictory nature

of our civilization and of the task, we should fulfill as humans in our relationship to the environment.

### Salvation of the Cosmos

The restoration of the deformed human is described in the books of the Bible as the process of salvation. Salvation concerns – according to the sacred books of Christianity – not only an individual human soul but the whole world and has a dynamic vision of the cosmos. Apostle PAUL in his letter to the Romans describes this process in the following way: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of God Who subjected it in hope, because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.”

The created world is thus – according to PAUL – included in the process of salvation. It perceives redemption through the coming of God’s daughters and sons. Where are these daughters and sons of God? Jesus as the archetype of a Son of God brings into the world the principle of the cross; love that renounces itself so that it may give life to others. We die so that you may live – in this way PAUL formulates this idea. Humans change from being owners into administrators when they combine their dominance with their sacrificing love, when they renounce the capriciousness of consumption and start to cultivate a self-restraining empathy of love. A classical Christian attitude is thus formed by a synthesis of the two above-mentioned antitheses.

And what conclusion shall be drawn on the basis of this discourse? Lately the film *The Lord of the Rings* has been shown in the cinemas around the world. This mythological work of TOLKIEN contains deep environmentalist attitudes. The world of Mordor is inspired by the world of the English industrial society of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is well-known that TOLKIEN (for ecological reasons) refused to use an automobile for the whole of his life. His stance was inspired by his well-grounded but traditionally understood Christian faith.

(Translated by Peter ŠAJDA)

#### Suggested Reading

BERMAN MORRIS, *The Reenchantment of the World*. 1984.

ELIOT T. S., *The Idea of a Christian Society (and other writings)*. 1982.

PEARCEY Nancy R. – THAXTON Ch. B., *The Soul of Science*. 1994.

ROSSI Paolo, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*.

ROSSI Paolo, *Hermetics and Rationality*.

SKOLIMOWSKI Henryk, *Eco-Theology: Toward a Religion for our Time*. 1985.

**Daniel PASTIRČÁK: Birtokolni – lemondani – gondozni:**



### **Kereszténység és ökológia**

Az esszé arra a kihívásra próbál választ adni, amely szerint a zsidó–keresztény lelkeségi hagyomány tehető felelőssé az ökológiai válságért. Ezen elképzelés szerint a Genézis közvetítte elképzelés az emberről, aki megbízást nyert a teremtett világ fölötti uralkodásra, az oka a természetet kizsákmányoló és romboló magatartásnak. A szerző azonban kimutatja, hogy ez az értelmezés mint olyan, már nem csupán a teremtéstörténetben rejlt eredeti üzenet egy lehetséges változata. Ha fölismerjük az Édenkert első lakójának történetében az ösztönző erőt, és az alternatívát olyan egyoldalú modellekkel szemben, mint a “környezeti darwinizmus” pozitivista, vagy a “környezeti panteizmus” lelkeségi paradigmája, akkor tudjuk majd átgondolni az ember föladatát és küldetését a világban. Az ember ugyanis nem tulajdonos, hanem igazgató. Felelősséget tartozik azért a hatalomért, amelyet a teremtő gondolkodásban és a szabad akaratban elnyert.

**Daniel PASTIRČÁK: Posiadać, podporządkować i zarządzać:**



### **Chrześcijaństwo i ekologia**

Esej próbuje odpowiedzieć na wyzwanie przedstawione w koncepcji pociągającej do odpowiedzialności za kryzys ekologiczny duchową tradycję judeochrześcijańską. Według wspomnianej opinii to idea zawarta w Księdze Rodzaju, że człowiekowi powierzono pieczę nad stworzonym światem, jest odpowiedzialna za pełne eksploatacji i zniszczenia podejście do natury. Autor pokazuje, że ta interpretacja jako taka jest więcej niż modyfikacją prawdziwego przesłania zawartego w Księdze Rodzaju. Odczytanie historii pierwszego człowieka w Rajskim Ogrodzie jako inspiracji i alternatywy dla jednostronnego modelu pozytywistycznego paradygmatu „środowiskowego Darwinizmu” lub duchowego „środowiskowego panteizmu”, umożliwi nam zastanowienie się nad zadaniami człowieka i jego misji w świecie. Ludzie nie są właścicielami, ale administratorami. Ponoszą odpowiedzialność za władzę, jaka była im dana w formie twórczej świadomości i wolnej woli.



**Daniel PASTIŘÁK:**

**Vlastnit, podléhat a spravovat**

Esej se snaží odpovědět na výzvu, kterou představuje pojetí obviňující židovsko-křesťanskou duchovní tradici z odpovědnosti za ekologickou krizi. Podle tohoto konceptu je zvěst Genese o pověření člověka vládou nad stvořeným světem zodpovědná za vykořisťovatelský a destruktivní postoj k přírodě. Autor ukazuje, že takováto interpretace je více než modifikací původní zvěsti knihy Genesis. Chápání příběhu prvního člověka v zahradě Eden jako inspirace a alternativa jednostranným modelům jak pozitivistického paradigmatu „environmentalistického Darwinismu“ nebo spirituálního „environmentalistického panteismu“ nám umožňuje reflektovat nad lidským údělem a posláním ve světě. Lidé nejsou vlastníky, ale správci. Nesou zodpovědnost za nadvládu, která jim byla svěřena v podobě kreativního vědomí a svobodné vůle.



**Daniel PASTIŘÁK: Besitzen, ergeben und verwalten:  
Christentum und Ökologie**

Der Artikel versucht auf die Herausforderung einzugehen, die durch die Auffassung, dass die jüdisch-christliche Tradition für die Öko-Krise verantwortlich ist, gestellt wird. Diese Auffassung wird unterstützt durch die in Genesis formulierte These, dass die Menschen mit der Herrschaft über die geschaffene Welt betraut wurden und somit verantwortlich für die Ausbeutung und Zerstörung der Natur sind. Der Autor zeigt, dass diese Interpretation als solche mehr als nur eine Modifikation der ursprünglichen Aussage aus Genesis ist. Die Geschichte der ersten Menschen im Garten Eden dient als Inspiration und Alternative für die einseitigen Modelle entweder des positivistischen Paradigmas des „Umwelt-Darwinismus“ oder des spirituellen „Umwelt-Pantheismus“. Das ermöglicht es uns die Aufgaben des Menschen in der Welt zu erkennen. Die Menschen sind nicht die Besitzer sondern die Verwalter der Welt. Sie tragen Verantwortung für die Dominanz, die ihnen in Form von kreativem Denken und freiem Willen verliehen worden ist.