THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIONS BELIEVES INTO DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND ENVIRONMENT

Lazar ANTON
University of Bucharest

Abstract: The man is the only being on Earth gifted with self-consciousness, which seeks to discover his own identity and the meaning of his own existence. The ethics of the environment or the eco-philosophy lays in the searching for the answer at the following question: how should the individual act and behave in relationship to the environment, to other living creatures and generally to nature. The problem of man’s relationship to the other living creatures and to nature, in generally contains a deep ethical load. The modern man is not able yet to understand the effects of his reason on nature. Only an ethics which accepts the fact that there must be certain obligations towards nature, which can perceive “nature” as system as material for the self-realisation of man. Social relationships focused on maximizing the profit are the main obstacles in front of our reconciliation with nature.

Keywords: ecology, the ethics of environment, eco-theology, environment behaviour, religion, resources

Cuvinte cheie: ecologie, etica mediului, ecoteologie, comportament ecologic, religie, resurse.

1. THE RELIGIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The man is the only being on Earth gifted with self-consciousness, which seeks to discover his own identity and the meaning of his own existence. The scientific and philosophical terminology, extremely varied and ambiguous at times in its attempt to formulate statements, is due, among other things, to the low ability of integrating the half-finite results, which are obtained in the area of specific disciplines. This fact leads to the crisis of knowing the integrative laws on which the complex and ingenious system of life works.
There is a series of sciences which tried and are still trying to elucidate this process of integrating the interpreting of reality, some having as a start point the sphere of physical reality (astronomy, geography, ecology), others the sphere of spiritual reality (philosophy, theology, religions science). More than ever the ecological crisis can be solved only through cooperation and interdisciplinarian integration. Therefore, three fundamental problems issues should be solved (fig.1):

I. What is the origin of the reality that we can know? (the ethics of the origins)
II. How does the reality of the world we live in work? (the ethics of the function)
III. What is the final aim toward which the Universe evolves? (the ethics of the final purpose).

The behavior and the attitude of the man towards himself, society, environment and eternity depend on the answer to these questions that define essentially the view over the world and life.

**Fig. 1 The internal structure of environmental ethics**
*Structura interna a eticii mediului*

If we define ecology in the widest way possible, as the science which studies the interaction between organisms and natural environment physical or abiotical, having as its aim optimizing the global ecosystem, for the wellbeing of the humans and theology as the science about spirituality or God, with all the involvements that the eco-theology is the science that studies the complex interacting between Spirit (God) – Man – Natural Environment (fig.2).

**Fig. 2 Ecotheology in the system of general sciences**
*Ecoteologia in sistemul stiintelor generale*
Consequently, Stephen Keller speaks about a scale of man’s attitude towards nature: negativistic, domining, utilitarianistic, scientific, moralist, humanist, ecological and naturalist, of identification.

The ethics of the environment or the eco-philosophy lays in the searching for the answer at the following question: how should the individual act and behave in relationship to the environment, to other living creatures and generally to nature. The problem of man’s relationship to the other living creatures and to nature, in generally contains a deep ethical load. The modern man is not able yet to understand the effects of his reason on nature. Only an ethics which accepts the fact that there must be certain obligations towards nature, which can perceive “nature” as system as material for the self-realisation of man. Social relationships focused on maximizing the profit are the main obstacles in front of our reconciliation with nature.

Changing conceptions for a more favorable perspective, as a first step regarding animals, then regarding more an more natural components happened pretty late in the evolution of philosophical thinking. The beginning of this change can be placed in time as occurring at the same time with Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism. In the first half of the 20th century the preoccupation for finding a formula of including non-human being into the sphere of ethics simply burst. The critics about the relationship between man and nature is generated by the increasingly difficult situation in which nature finds itself because of the thoughtless and unlimited human intervention. Issues generated by own report to nature include so many domains, that critics shows up from all direction. Birnbache, which regards the problem from the angle of our responsibility to the future generations, does not see as possible a total reorienting of ethics, but only new forms of practical applying of moral principles already established: “Responsibility towards future generations is an unavoidable duty, in front of increasing dimensions of human possibilities of development into what regards the future life of conscious gifted being. The responsibility towards future generation is, first of all, a problem of applied ethics, practically oriented.

Three different philosophical approaches can be distinguished in the issues of the relationship between human species and nature:

1. **The cartesian perspective** (Descartes, Augustin, Toma D’Aquino) according to which nature, the animal kingdom included, is fully locked of rights in the favour of the only pole of meaning and value, which is the human subject. The criterion on whose basis the difference between human and animals is made is reason.

2. **Humanistic and republican tradition**, as it contours itself Rousseau’s and Kant’s writings, but also in 19th century France. This position does not overcome the cartesian anthropocentrism, but sustains the idea that man is bounded by animals through certain obligations, especially the one that be should not make them suffer uselessly. Rousseau considered that the “natural man”, “the Wildman” that is true man, that existed before the perverting and transformations generated by culture and civilization was the human ideal of kindness.

3. **Utilitarianistic thinking** (Jeremy Bentham), to which man is not the only owner of rights, but, along with him, any other being capable of feeling pleasure and pain. This way, the supreme principle of anthropocentrism is overcome; the ultimate aim of moral and political activity is maximizing the amount of happiness in the world and not freedom, above all, as Kant, for instance, sustained from this point of view, animals have rights, because they have there own interests worthy to be taken into consideration. Sensitivity, the
ability of feeling pleasure and pain, represent for Bentham’s utilitarianism the necessary criterion in order to dispose of juridical and moral rights.

2. RELIGIONS POINT OF VIEW ON THE ENVIRONMENT

In the following we shall throw an eye on three major perspective about world and life and on the way in which they approach the ecological crisis.

2.1 The pantheist and hindu-budistic ecology

In Hinduism, the report with the ritual allows establishment a hierarchy between earthly being. This way, man distinguishes himself, from the animals through ritual activity (karman). Hinduistic thinkers agree that animals own the same perceptive and mental abilities as man, but the inability of practicing rituals is what keeps the non-human being on a lower level. They are damned to wash away the sins commit in previous live by souls reincarnated in them. From this point of view, nature in its wholeness is an organism penetrated by a vital force and it represents various manifestation of God, in which God is everything and everything is God. In the animistic religions there is a sacred “mana” or “soul” in every single thing, including the material ones, and knowing these spirits is essential for success and peaceful living with the surrounding environment. Man is the same thing as nature, being situated at the same level. From here springs out an ethics of environment, based on respect towards nature. Pantheists protest against materialistic technology, through which “modern society makes war with nature” (Ch. Reich), acusing also the biblical concept from Genesis 1, through which the domination and enslavery of nature encourages the exploit and self-destructing instinct of man (N. Geisler, 1989), promoting a retirement as great as possible from nature. A series of religions eclectical movements called “The New Consciousnessness” or “New Age” promote, among others, a pantheist religion of the Earth (W.Gramberg – Michelson, 1987). It is hard to say in how far will these movements to stop the present technological “march”, which enrolls more and more regions with pantheist vocation (Japan, China, Coreea, India).

2.2 The Jewish-cristian ecology

The conceptual ground of this perspective is the biblical one, from which the Jewish-cristian system of interpreting the world and life formed. In this focus of it, following points of view should be mentioned:

- The entire Universe is created by God ex nihilo, unlike the material world of evolutionism (atheism) and the unity between God and matter in pantheism (ex deo). From the doctrine of creation comes out the fact that the world is God’s property (Ps. 24.1)
- The creation mirrors God’s glory (Ps. 8.3-4; 19.1; 139.7-12; Rom. 1.20), being teocentric – “the theatre of God’s the pattern of the Holly Third” (impregnated in the trinitary or threedimensional Universe: the space (length – wideness-high) – time (past – present – future) – matter (energy-manifestation – phenomenon). The natural creation is a sort of theophany of God’s presence (Acts 14.17; Rom. 1.20, Iov 38.39). This is what led to “the deep love of the natural world and the communion with it” (St. Francisc) and to “treating nature with care and respect” (St. Benedict).
• The matter is essentially good (Gen. 1.4,10,12,18), unlike in Greek thinking, that sees in matter a manifestation of evil in itself.

• The material world is sustained and acted by God, the functional Cause of the Universe (Ps. 104.10-14, Jews 1.3, Col. 1.17) opposite to the deist or impersonal perspective of nature (Ps. 77.17-18); from here it result that the ecological interference with its operations is a presumption with serious ethical implications.

• The creation received the honor of hosting the Maker “through the embodiment of our Lord Jesus Christ” (John 1.14; Coll. 2.9).

• The creation has the promise of redemption and regeneration (Rom. 8.18; 2 Peter 3.10, Rev. 21.1).

• In the frame creation, the man owns a position which is also superior but a little lower than the spiritual level of the angels (Ps. 8.5). The man is the surveyor of the natural environment and has three main obligations: the reproduction of the species, mastering and using.

The creation is therefore God’s possession, given to the man to administrate and preserve it (Ps. 115.16). According to H. Morris, through the submission of Earth one can understand “bringing all natural processes and systems into a state of optimum productivity and use to the glory of God and wellbeing of mankind” which means loyal and productive administration of the Earth. This way, the man is a companion and a coworker with God in the natural and spiritual creation (2 Cor. 6.1), and the labor receives a religion significance, institutionalized even in the garden of Eden. N. Geisler (1971) underlines three reasons for which the contamination of the natural environment is morally wrong: the contamination affects the person whole, destroys the natural environment, physically and spiritually; the contamination affects other people being more and more difficult to separate “private contamination” from “public contamination”; pollution violates God’s laws, which establish certain reports between people and things. The laws are defined as “structures of relationship designed to maximize the intrinsic value of people”. When somebody contaminates the environment, he is the violator of certain laws given by God to help people. When people disobey a law given by God (secretly or not), they commit a personal act, which eventually offends the Givers of laws. Pollution is one of the most public sins.

The ethics of the environment aims to three inter-relational values: preserving the resources, protecting the natural environment and respecting all forms of life (J. Or, 1954). The cultural mandate aims to three fundamental obligations: propagating the species through multiplying (filling but not over populating); mastering the Earth (people are not only descending from nature, but also above it; not only workers but also kings) (N. Geisler, 1993); preserving the environment through labor and care, conservation. Lord Jesus Christ illustrated the best the duality slave – king which Christians most follow – “leading through serving” (Jews 13.7; 1 Peter 5.2-3).

2.3 Islam ecology

The position of the Islamic ecology can be observed in the coranic writing. They speak about a vast community of Allah’s creatures, to which all living beings on Earth belong. Nature, in Islamic tradition, does not appear as “a stronger” or as “strange” for the man and that is because the world is a familiar picture, favorable for a peaceful and quiet life. In addition to this, muslim laws suggest avoiding any act of useless cruelty against animals. It is clearly specified the fact that the Prophet “sends those who that animals cruelly to hell and rewards those who defend them”. Just as Jewish tradition, the Muslim
one brings together a series of texts contains practical suggestions regarding man behavior towards animals. The whole picture vision of Islamic tradition is the following one: the man is a member of the creature community Allah created and he has obligations towards everything that surrounds him because the world is his home. The human being has the moral obligation of protection Allah’s creation for his own good, for the one of other living creatures also.

2. 4 The humanist- materialistic ecology

According to this point of view, the surrounding reality is basically material (ex material), that is physical-chemical, organized on several levels, from dead to alive, throughout evolutorial mechanisms, developed in un-definite time. Matter has always been there, in one form or another and energy is unlimited. The ecological crisis happens due to in-equal distribution of natural resources to human communities and can be solution through technology, education and revolution. The only reason for which the natural environment should not be over exploited is the general wellbeing. Before noticing the risks of environmental disorders, there was no limit into what regards its exploit arriving even “violation of nature”. The entire universe is a mechanism without any rights or interests and it had to be manipulated without hesitation and dominated. From this conception a “paradigm of the industrial age” developed (W. Harman, 1976), based on material progress and unlimited consume on the belief that through science and technology every problem will find its solution.” Then, latter, “a paradigm of the natural environment” developed (L. Millbrath, 1982) based on the high value of work, the acceptance of resources limitation and the simple way of life and a great participation at the political and work decisions. The ethics of the environment is grounded on the responsibility towards humanity, which justifies environment protection and contains several variants: the ethics of “the saving boat” (G. Hardin), the ethics of division.

3. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN PROTECTING AND PRESERVING THE ENVIRONMENT

The spiritual view on natural environment, in different theological approaches is focused on the idea that nature represents a divine gift, which man ought to enjoy, but without creating disorders into the ecological mechanism which insure the right functioning of natural systems and life quality implicitly. During the age of economical development the Church sustained the value of capital, of technology progress and resource exploit, parallel with the international debates on environmental situation on can observe a change direction of ecclesiastic speech one towards promoting a positive approach of natural environment. This fact becomes obvious looking at the conferences of the World Churches Council and other ecumenical meetings, for which the issue of environment represents an inter-confessional debate common-point. Lately, an increase of churches involvement in ecological education can be noticed is local churches, which more than anyone have a direct part in developing Christian behavior towards natural environment. We believe that it is a duty of the clerics and of the local spiritual leaders to integrate in their religion message the moral values and the bound with respect for the nature, as master-piece of divine creation;
ecological sins are, in God’s eyes just as blamable as other sins (social, physiological, spiritual).

There are a few concrete ways through which religion can contribute to promoting ecological education, exploiting the opportunities which it has its relation to the local communities:

- **Ecological messages** which contain principle of Christian ethics concerning the natural environment, all this in the frames of some thematic biblical studies or in the context of certain events caused by natural phenomena, dayly, monthly or annually cycles, the phases of vegetation, the sanctifying of water, thanking for crops day.

- **Conferences on ecological themes** implicates creating an organized context to which specialists in natural sciences (biology, geography, chemistry, environmental physics), are invited, as well as theologists doctors, who present scientific communications on the relationship between environment, man’s health and Christian ethics (religion ethics); the debates can involve local leaders and other leading figures who have a word in helping to form an opinion in local communities.

- **Ecological actions** coordinated by the Church in partnership with the school or by other non-religion institutions, implicating children, teenagers and adults which were previously made aware of the importance of preserving the local environment. Local administrations can cooperate this way with local institution and churches in the frame of some multilayered projects, which aim to creating a healthy environment, rebuilding certain contaminate area, especially in the industrial cities, campaigns of information.

- **Lessons on ecological themes**.

  Taking, into account the fact that in our country’s cultural tradition this type of actions is spontaneous or inexistent, we believe that such examples of good practice can be given through elaborating and implementing some projects financed by local, national or European authorities, on different areas of interest, fact that could simultaneously lead to the development of inter-confessional relationship, and to those between local public institutions, economic agents included, all interested in protecting the quality of the environment.

4. **REFLECTING RELIGIONS BELIEVES IN ENVIRONMENT BEHAVIOUR**

One’s attitude towards the environment was the main argument of many studies interested in explaining types of ecological behavior developed throughout time in different geographical areas. A series of the theories was elaborated in order to prove the connection between environment and economy, culture, philosophy and theology (fig.3). We think that a whole approach of the matter will lead to obtaining several elements which can explain the mechanism which sits at the basis of ecological behavior, focusing on the possibilities complex that individual human and collective personality rely on. At time, discrepancies between the inner perception of the life environment and outer behavior, manipulated by
The importance of religious beliefs

public opinion, towards which and individual, in exceptional situations manifest an attitude that can make a difference.

A Weber type analyses with special reference to the report between theology and ecological behavior could lead to obtaining certain typologies which can explain the space – time disparities of the attitude towards the environment, an extremely important thing in the long term and average term prognosis concerning the impact that human communities shall have on the way of exploiting the resources and the opportunities offered by the ecosphere, implicitly on the life and environment quality.

The necessary steps are:
1. The dogmatic analysis of ecological theology characteristic to religion confessions.
2. Researching the types of ecological behavior on the main religions of the world.
3. Identifying the reports between the theological conception and the attitude towards environment, reflected in the organizational values of the companies that exploit directly the resources of the environment.
4. Analysis of legislation regarding the environment from the perspective of the values and the ecological ethics, as well as from the one of the way in which it is or it is not apply nationally, regionally and locally.
5. Analysis of the degree of involvement of local religions communities in protecting environment quality, starting with the educational activities and continuing with the ones of preventing deterioration or reconstruction of deteriorated landscape.
6. Constructing an explanatory pattern of eco-theological behavior which sits at the basis of realizing prognosis studies regarding the environmental situation on short, average and long term, multileveled, all becoming premises for elaborating projects that aim to changing mentalities and negative attitude towards natural environment (fig. 4).
In our country, a similar a christian approach is all most compulsory because during the communist years a great ecological degrading took place. The reason for this half – disaster has its start-point in overcome technologies which produced pollution, but in the emphasis set on the increase of production quantity, which was regardless of the natural mechanism socialist competition. The background of this fact was a moral atheas degrading, which went on even after 1989 under the mask of a half-religiousness (about 99% declare themselves Christians) but in reality in total contradiction with the values of biblical Christianity. Taking the above mentioned facts in to consideration, F. Bacon’s statement towards the balance which must exist between ecology and religion becomes relevant: “Exercising one’s rights on nature (which has divine origins) must be governed by the voice of reason and the true religion”.

5. THE ATTITUDE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY TO RESOURCES

An essential component of Christian theology is the attitude that the Christian religion, predominat in the Romanian an European space, promotes about nature and the way of exploiting and valuating resources. This way three fundamental questions arise: 1) What is the nature /origin of the resources? 2) How should the existent resources in ecosphere? 3) What are the right way of using and exploiting the resources of environment? (fig. 5)
In order to understand the way in which Christian churches understood the problem of the resources, it is necessary to observe a few important documents, officially elaborated by upper ecclesiasts. The famous “Rerum Novarum” appeared in 1891, long before the international conferences on environmental themes, is considered to be start point of Christianity thinking and to have as main source for written revelation of the Holly Scripture. It starts from the idea that Bible first clarifies man’s attitude towards earthly goods in general and goes on with the attitude towards different types of resources created and placed by God in the geosphere of the planet. There have been opposite positions intensely expressed in the Christian world, from those of denial or complete discrediting of resource value (considered to be an obstacle in front off salvation) like the maniheistic view upon the world, considered essentially evil to that of identifying the resources, no matter their effects on man’s health and environment quality and here we mention the concept “prosperity Gospel” in which wealth is a sign of divine blessing.

REFERENCES

Anton, L., (2005), Geografia religiilor. Lucrare metodico-științifică în vederea obținerii gradului didactic I, Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara, 280 pag., manuscris


Duma, S., (2000), *Geocologia ca stiinta a interrelatiilor*, Terra anul XXX (L), nr. 1, Bucuresti


