
THE RIGHT FOR PROPERTY AND ITS LIMITS ACCORDING TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

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Abstract

From the Bible's perspective, the Creation is a sign of the great divine love and the Earth is offered to man as the proper environment for him to fulfil his sense of existence. The great dignity of man results from the fact that he was created only after a specific ambient has been prepared. In the biblical vision, land was given to man as limited and temporarily property with the only goals of providing food and always remembering man of God and not to represent a boundary between man and Divinity. The prophets warn that as far as man excludes God from his mind and his heart he is being excluded from God's property also, as he is no longer capable of using it and keeping it clean.

So that one always remembers the Giver, the Bible seldom refers to God's concern about justice among people. Thus He commands that one shall not take advantage of the Earth according to his will as the land does not belong to him: *The land shall no be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are aliens and tenants* (Leviticus 25.23). Even if the Bible referred especially to Jews, we all must realize that we are only administrators and temporarily heirs of the Earth that we cannot own as if we would be the last reality of this world. On the contrary we are responsible for the way we use the gift we have been given in front of God and in front of future nations. The Bible also turns our attention to the fact that we have a common responsibility for nature, environment and future generations. These should also be able to enjoy an unaltered nature.

Keywords: property, prophets, ecological concern, Christian vision

1. Introduction

According to the biblical texts, man has been brought to existence only after God prepared the proper environment for his fulfilment. In the theological thinking not only Earth but life itself was given to man as a gift, only that the former could not have been complete without the latter – the Earth as the most adequate environment for him to complete his goals. In the old testamentary ideology the Earth appears as an environment created for man that is why when the chosen people did not have its own land, Yahweh Himself was concerned with providing a proper one. As Filaret of Moscow underlined, man was created

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last for he could enter the Cosmos as *a king and a pontiff*. This idea of the privileged destiny of man is also to be found at some of the Church's Fathers. Unfortunately, as one can see, man did not always reach the highness of his calling. As he did not listened to the divine calling, man lost the great opportunity he was given to be king and priest of the creation. St. Maxim the Confessor saw the world as a cosmically sanctuary in which he has been placed with the precise task to preach in the name of all God's creation. Although part of the creation man over emphasized his role as a master. He considered that he has to be more a king than a priest of the creation. He almost forgot the great responsibility he had to the nature in which he has been placed. As it is underlined in the final document of the 7th Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, Canberra, 1991, God imposed precise limits to the first human couple on the right to eat from garden Eden's fruits. As long as they have been respected men lived in peace and harmony with the environment, and the garden Eden was the paradise. From the moment these restrictions were broken, the divine anger came upon them and the relations between the first men and the environment were abolished. As such, the harmony that existed, from the divine will, between man and the rest of creation, were suddenly interrupted.

If by God's will and work the Earth is fertile and productive, as Noah was insured, after a violent interference of man the pre-established equilibrium – useful to all creatures – might be broken. Although man was given the land, as he is the perfect creature, this is not his own good because it belongs to all the livings (Isaiah 38.11).

2. The Earth as God's property and man's temporary good

According to the biblical statement, only God is absolute Owner of the whole Earth and He gives it to peoples for temporary and limited use. In fact, as I stated before, the goal itself of Earth's creation was that to be given to man so that, through this gift he could always remember his Creator. By this gift given to man for working, God wanted to produce a permanent dialogue between Him and man. These are the reasons why the land on Canaan was parted, in the name of God, by Joshua between the 12 nations of Israel, as temporary property that was meant to be inherited by future nations. In front of God all community's members are equals because they all inherit according to similar criteria. Receiving only a part of what everyone should be given; Israel was reminded that in fact he is not absolute owner of the Earth. Being offered to temporarily inherit the Earth, Israel's sons, but not only them, were supposed to always admit that the land is God's gift and that only Him is the Master and they should use it with care. Moreover, on the biblical ideology, after becoming a property, the Earth must remind man of God the Giver and it should not stand between them. Meaning, he should not be over concerned with the Earth so that he will forget about God. St. John Chrisostome states that the itself placing of the first human couple in the Heaven was meant not only to cause a lot of pleasure but also to make them thank God and be grateful, thinking how much kindness he

received without doing something to deserve it [1]. This is what the holy writer wants to emphasize when he advises Israel's sons for a perpetuum memento on the divine good works. He says: *Sema Israel! – listen Israel* (Deuteronomy 6). Thus, man has the moral duty to remember that God gave him the Earth and he cannot use it as he likes. Even if the Creator let the first human couple to subdue the land in their favour and to reign over the other living creatures (Genesis 1. 28) man should not forget though that he must be responsible and carefulness in this mission and he should not be despotically nor unwise. The text adds: *to till it and keep it* (Genesis 2.15) together with Eden's garden all the goods God created, goods man did not deserved but got it for granted as a valuable gift of which he will be responsible [2]. This memento must become a gratefulness towards the Donator as it is said: *lest, when you have eaten and your fill, and have built fine houses and live in them... then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God... but remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power* (Deuteronomy 8.12; 8.14, 18). For man, God specially prepared the Earth will all his goods, just like a rich meal from which man may eat but without forgetting to thank. Creation, with all its gifts should represent a reason to praise, as the psalmist says: *Oh Lord how manyfold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all* (Psalms 104.24). Unfortunately, man often completely forgets about his Protector. Not a few times did Jesus Christ remind men that God let nature to serve His plan of redemption and that is why in His parables he used many natural elements so that He could make men think about the careful, celestial Father (Lucas 11.1-13). The Evangelist realised the danger in which man is and he also foresaw that for Israel's sons there will be a time when, after seeding, harvesting and enjoying the richness of the Earth, they will forget God, assuring themselves of their self-sufficiency. Man always may fall into the temptation to believe that he can do everything and to consider that God may now on be completely expelled from his property ad his thoughts. The modern man, consumed with immediate and substantial gains, *by the help of science and techniques extended and is still extending his reign over almost all nature* [3]. Intuiting that this will be a temptation and a forever present danger, the evangelist advises the believer to always remember the times when he wandered in the desert, that is the most difficult time in one's life, when man feels the strong need to be protected by the Divinity, as he has been in fact. The allusion is not valuable only for the Israelite believer because every man, more or less, might have a time of desert ness in his life, a moment of trial. That is why it is mentioned so often the desert from the so far past, because, projecting the experience of the past over the present, man might be stimulated to be forever vigilance. Advising man – and not only the people of Israel – to remember the past, we are drawn the attention to the fact that this present is a gift from God and that this gift can be limited and even taken back if the receiver does not prove that he deserves it. The most common manner by which the Israelite believer could express his gratitude towards God was to bring the tenth part of the crop and of the animals to the sanctuary. The first crop, in the antique oriental and Israelite thinking was considered to be the most precious and most

important. On one hand, giving away these first crops to God, the believer truly offered the Lord his most valuable goods and, on the other hand, these were seen as the anticipation of what will come as they were blessed. This custom has an obvious social goal, as I will show in a future subchapter on the oppressed social classes: the widows, the orphans, the strangers, the elders and the slaves. The commandment of the Mosaic Law that imposed to the Jews to offer the tenth part of their first crops (Deuteronomy 15.1-11) wanted in fact to re-establish the social right from the origin. This became from bad to worse as man forgot the divine will. This aspect also refers to Jesus Christ our Lord who says: *For you always have the poor with you* (Matthew 26.11). With other words, man is not always correct and as a result of his social uprightness the paupers have the divine right to be helped. In fact, the Old Testament refers many times to the permanent care of God to institute the rightness between men. That is why the Israelites were recommended not to use the land by their will because the Earth is not theirs for good: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and tenants* (Leviticus 25.23).

From the biblical perspective, as managers of the world, we have a common responsibility towards nature, environment and last but not least towards future nations. These nations have the same divine right that we have had together with our ancestors: to inherit an unaltered Earth that can give its fruits. Thus, we are responsible in front of God for the way we use the gift He has given to us. As Israel's sons, we do not have an eternal heritage because we are all strangers and passengers in this world. As it belongs to God, the Earth remains saint through its destination and it must be respected. As absolute owner, God may decide who and how should use the land. From the biblical perspective man can not arbitrarily use the Earth not the nature, with only one goal, ignoring it's the former destination given by God. This destination man must develop but must not betray [4]. As St. John Chrisostome stated, the man's quality of master of the Earth and environment is never meant to substitute oneself for God but to foster the self fulfilment.

When the Israelite showed an extraordinary attachment to the land inherited from his parents, he proved in fact that he wants it to forever remain Yahweh's property. To support this idea the Bible tells us about the pauper Nabot who refused to sell to the king Ahab the vineyard he had in Israel and which, legally, could no have been taken from him in any way (I Kings 21.4). Nabot's attitude should not be seen as purely sentimental attachment to the heritage left by his parents but moreover an attachment to the mosaic law that strictly designated the attitude one should have towards the Earth and in the same time towards the land that God gave to his ancestors thus, to his family (Numbers 36.7, Leviticus 25.13) [5]. So, Nabot refuses the king's offer not only because the price offered would have been totally unacceptable in value, but because keeping the family's heritage represented the ideal for any of the Israelite families, an ideal consecrated by practice and protected by law. As consequence not even the king could have made someone renounce at his family property or sell it (Deuteronomy 19.14, Numbers 27.7-11, Jeremiah 31.6-9; Ruth

4,.9). The property could have been given away only in case of extreme poverty, but the owner had the right to buy it back until the Jubilee year when it would be returned anyway.

The Sabbath Day (Šabat = rest), Sabbath Year as well the Jubilee Year instituted by Moses had also the meaning of an economical reestablishment because the properties could be returned to their former owners. It is known that the sabbatical rest gave man the possibility to fulfil the divine cult that God proposed but also had an obvious social character. The rest could last one year (the 7th) in which time the crops were given to the paupers and land was no one's property [4, p. 219]: "*For six years you shall sow your land and shall gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard*". (Exodus 23.10-11) In these times also all the debts of those who couldn't pay until the Jubilee or Sabbatical Year were erased. In these periods the ecological balance of the environment was re-established as the land, not being worked, could recover somehow. The Sabbath reminded the believer that the time in which he moved and lived had a sacred character so he had to show his gratitude towards God.

3. Ecological concerns from the Bible's perspective

The permanent concern of Israel's sons towards the land of Canaan is supported by the fact that this country belonged to all of them – many times it was called *Israel's* heritage so it had to remain Yahweh's property. As such, the Israelites settled on Yahweh's property become themselves Yahweh's property. They were permanently aware of the divine presence in this country more than elsewhere and thus they had for the land, animals and nature a special consideration. The environment was to be used between the legal limits and with great responsibility. Thus, the working and the exploitation of land is presented by the Bible as a great responsibility of man even from his creation (Genesis 2. 15). The original sin did not take away from him this responsibility but made the working of the land harder, as direct consequence of the curse God spelled on him (Genesis 3.17-19).

Using responsibly and carefully the nature, as something that will help him fulfil his duties; the Israelite believer never forgot that the divine gift was given to him as well as to all his fellow creatures. He was also perfectly aware of the fact that man does not hold life in all her plenitude nor its autonomy because he owns to God his existence, life itself being God's property. As such he could not abuse of nature as long as in peace and in war the law stated that no one should damage their fellow creature's goods. For example, during the assault of a city the cutting of the trees was banned: *If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down* (Deuteronomy 20.19). Also, Moses law forbid the Israelites to cut the trees while assaulting enemy cities to use them for manufacturing

weapons or machines necessary in the fight and also the destruction of seeds and orchards. Because from the biblical perspective any life form has its origins in God and returns eventually to Him (Ecclesiastes 12.7, Psalms 104) we are recommended to have towards everything that exists and surrounds us the same attitude we have towards God's property. If we cannot be masters of our own bodies (Matthew 6.27, 10.30) because they are part of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 7, 15, 19) nor of our lives, because as the Scripture says: ... we cannot be in fact owners of anything, less the air or the earth which are given to us by God. It is true that the same Bible says that man was created last *in the image of God* (Genesis 1.27) not only as the greatest of all creation but as it's master as well. Unfortunately, he seldom behaved as a real despot until, due to his unrestrained wishes, the natural equilibrium was completely destroyed. That is why, as St. Paul says: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now* (Romans 8.22); at least until nowadays no one have noticed a *metanoia* of man. The biblical word *metanoia* expresses the idea of a good change, not only of the behaviour but also of the way o thinking. It also suggests a complete turning of man towards the absolute, towards God, the universal values which give the certainty of spiritual and material life.

One may notice that the environment problem is more and more talked about all over the globe by people from with different social backgrounds, with different opinions or preoccupations. Giving a solution to this problem means the survival of the humankind and not only; has it meant the salvation of life itself who is more and more threatened. As a Greek thinker underlined, *a panic almost general has taken over man, a panic generated not by the complex guilt man has in front of God but in front of nature, spreading the fear of an imminent catastrophe* [6].

An essential and sufficient danger for the extinction of modern society is the social lack of equality, the unjust division of goods which naturally belong to all men, no matter what the race, religion or geographical position. If the Christian teachings supports the equality of all people who are created by the same Father, the Same God, this clearly means an equal division of the goods that support life. This is also clearly recommended by some of the Holy Fathers [7]. Unfortunately not even the technical progress nor the present mentality are capable of leading to a correct and equilibrated use of water, as the most important of all needs. Although humankind never had such abundance in so many regions nor it had so many technical possibilities and such an economical force, it didn't manage to solve the feeding problem for all people because at the counter point the hunger, the misery, the violence and the ignorance have never been greater. It is true on the other hand that, although with lot of shyness, people start to be more and more aware of their unity, of their dependence on the same vital resources such as: the air, the water and the natural energetically resources, all humankind still hesitates in considering that the civilization's welfares, must and should really extend to all nations of the Earth [8]. For the moment this ideal is not possible to become true as more and more people want to live a richer life, free, full of facilities, a dignity life for a modern man. It

imposes in the same time the using of all possibilities that nowadays society can offer for the self needs.

4. A new Christian vision of the nature

If, as I have emphasized before, God brought man to existence in the last phase of the Creation so that he could reign over the Earth in Lord's name, the consequence has been and remains marked by egoism. That is, the relation of man with nature has been and still is based almost exclusively on the idea that man must own the nature no matter what, attitude that led to an irrational and violent use of the environment and also to its destruction. For short time only humankind realised that we have reached a dead end, a crossroads in our existence when we must reconsider our relations with nature taking into account of course the sacrifices which arise. If this reconsideration will not provide clear results, then humankind is in the jeopardy to receive from nature – on the long term only terror, sufferance and misery. The question that now arises is how much the religion – generally speaking – and in our case the Christian religion, can foster the hinder of the decline and the salvation of the environment. It is true what Hans Küng stated that the reason and the main preoccupation of all religions have always been to take care of themselves, of keeping and developing their own institutions, of defending their teaching [9]. But still, they are capable of, if they want to of course and they have to, confessing if front of all nations that they firstly take care of man's wellbeing, because they cannot isolate from the world and because they have the advantage of a moral power superior to that of many international organizations [9]. Especially the Christian religion has the duty to remind the world that God, Creator of all creatures, placed the history of humankind in a more vast context, a cosmically one. It also has the duty to remind people that before creating human beings, without considering them, God created nature and all within it. When man appeared the creation was already complete, or, as the Bible says: *God saw that it was good* (tov meod = Genesis 1.25). That is why man must never forget that the commandment given to the first human couple, to procreate and to prosper should not be fulfilled on the damage of the rest of Earth's creatures that have also been blessed by God with the same blessing. According to the Talmud man's relations with the animals represent an element of the moral life. The 10 Commandments state that part of the non speaking creatures should also respect the Sabbath rest [10].

The privileged position of man expressed by the phrase: *created man in His own image* (Genesis 1.27) means, in Saint Basil the Great's opinion pre-established duty of man: that of reigning. But being created in the image of God thus being somehow God's associate in ruling the world it does not necessary mean the irrational exploitation of the animals and of the whole nature, but moreover a responsible attitude towards it.

Without asking men to blindly follow and without violating their conscience, the religion of the First Testament proposed the believers very convincing moral motivations for their acts in such that the phrase: so *that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you* seldom appears as a leitmotif (Exodus 20.12, Deuteronomy 28). When the Israelites stopped following the divine prophets were send to them as extraordinary ambassadors of the divinity. They clearly proved that Yahweh does not speak only through them but also through the nature itself which many times was meaning of the divine blessing or scolding or and even through the happening of the historical events. In fact, they have seldom learned that the dispute between man and nature is a normal result of sin and malice: *Therefore the heavens above you have withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labours* (Haggai 1.10, 1.11; Amos 4.7).

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