
RE-APPRECIATING AND RE-APPROPRIATING THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

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Abstract

Today, there has been an increased awakening to environmental issues. Evidently, since human beings depend on other things in the eco-system for their survival, they need to cherish and care for the Cosmos in which they live. However, in the exercise of its creative intelligence, humankind has manipulated the environment in a way that has tampered with the ecological balance. A lot of factors are responsible for this, among which are the Enlightenment objectivistic world-view, rise of capitalism, and the industrial revolution etc. The effect of this imbalance affects both the natural environment and human beings themselves.

There is need, therefore, for a hallowing of the integrity of creation. At the heart of this quest is *metanoia*, a change of heart that breeds a certain kind of life-style – personal and communal. Gerald O’Collins sees in the bodily resurrection of Jesus a call to re-appreciate and re-appropriate the integrity of Creation. For him, resurrection is not only a re-creative event but also revelatory – revealing something about Jesus, God, human beings and their world. As eschatological event, it touches the entire reality, bringing them into harmonious whole. Leaning on his interpretation, this paper will argue that understanding the resurrection of Jesus as it relates to human beings and their world will offer, hopefully, that required change of heart that leads to a new way of living on Earth’.

Keywords: Ecology, environment, metanoia, eschatology

1. Introduction

Today, perhaps more than ever before, there has been increased awakening to environmental issues. The ecological crisis increases with the sophistication of scientific and technological developments, which not only change continuously the face of the world, but also the way human beings live. At the centre of the crisis lies the exploitation of the planet by human beings. The complexity of the problem has drawn various peoples in various disciplines into active discussion. As it is, the problem of Ecology cannot be solved by

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technology alone, since religious and ethical questions are also involved [1]. A multi-dimensional approach is, therefore, needed.

This paper will attempt to offer one approach, specifically from the religious-cum-ethical perspective. Our argument takes as its point of departure the resurrection of Jesus, a faith conviction that can and should have an effect on our attitude towards nature. Our goal is to draw attention to the resurrection summons to *metanoia*, to a renewed perspective on nature, and to an appropriate attitudinal response.

2. Creation: origin and dignity

Biblical faith states that God created the world and everything in it – each according to its own kind, and human beings in his image and likeness; and “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1.1-31). The Christian *credo* (confession of faith) invokes God as the almighty, the Creator. However, while some people see creation as God bringing non-being into being, some others see it as the mere ordering of a chaotic cosmos. Whichever is the case, Christian faith insists that the world was created by God, and that, in so doing, God put order into the cosmos. It is believed that the Universe has its own harmony, integrity and dynamic balance.

Besides creationism, there is also an alternative cosmic evolutionary theory. It argues that things evolved from simple forms to complex beings, although differences exist with regard to the details of such accounts. Hans Küng, for one, writes that our world has a history of 13.7 billion years, with the Earth existing 4.5 billion years, and *homo sapiens* merely coming on stage about 200,000 years ago [2]. Küng’s position is, in part, shared by the International Theological Commission [3]. What remains unclarified here is the origin of that assumed simplest form that evolves into complex elements. It is possible for one to find different accounts of scientific origin of the universe. Daniel Harlow speaks of the Primate of Ireland, Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) as holding creation to occur on Sunday 23 October 4004 BCE, making the universe about 6,000 years old [4].

However one approaches the origin and nature of things in our world, their essential goodness and beauty cannot be glossed over. Thomas Aquinas argues that no creature can reflect alone all the divine perfections. He says: “For he brought things into existence so that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and re-enacted through them. And because one single creature was not enough, he produced many and diverse, so that what was wanting in one expression of the divine goodness might be supplied by another, for goodness, which in God is single and all together, in creatures is multiple and scattered.” [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.47.1] But taken together, creation shows the beauty of God and can inspire the human spirit to an appreciation of the beauty of nature. Nature constantly reveals and lauds God: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalms 19.1). Nature deserves reverence, not because it has become divine, but because

it is intrinsically related to God and because existential interdependence characterizes things in creation.

3. The anthropocentric nature of God's Creation

Of all creatures, only humankind takes after God – *imago Dei*. Like other things, humans are contingent; but unlike them, they are rational and they have a claim to personhood. God entrusted the world to humankind with the injunction to subdue and to have dominion, to till and to keep (Genesis 1.28, 2:15). A snapshot at these injunctions reveals God's plan for the human beings he has put in the midst of his creation. Without being apart from the rest of creation, human beings have their tasks in and for the world in which they live. To 'subdue' invites them to conquer the adverse forces of nature and bring them under control, while the command to 'have dominion' gives them the power of overseer of Creation. To 'till' invests them with the dignity of co-creator by which they take responsible care of Creation, harnessing it to ever greater beauty, whereas to 'keep' commands them to careful preservation of nature. In this way, humankind is called to responsible co-creation and preservation of nature. Thus, human beings are in the world as 'delegates' and 'stewards of God', charged with co-operative responsibility over creation. Like God, they are to put order into chaos, promote life – human, animal and plant life - and to show great concern for the integrity of creation.

Human beings are the developer of their humanity, the architect of their history and to a large degree, the course of things in the world. God neither interferes with human freedom nor constrains people to act in any predetermined way. Human beings are in the world as actors and determinants of the direction and rhythm of the world history. The progress and development of the world depend on their ingenuity and activities. While the creation injunction places on humankind the task of subduing and ruling the Earth (Genesis 1.28), Edward Schillebeeckx points out that this lordship of creation "in no way implies the demolition and pollution of this Earth," but instead demands "a constructive – almost divine – , caring creativity" [5]. While God gives humankind the freedom to make history and control the course of events in the world; they are, however, responsible for what they do, for themselves and for the world in which they live.

4. Human Activities and the Emergent Ecological Crisis

The course of human history has witnessed enormous progress towards enhancing life and the control of nature. There are advances in the areas of social, political, scientific, technological and aesthetic life. The industrial revolution very much changed the face of the world. Human beings, no doubt, make optimal use of their creative intelligence. While there are amazing results from these exploits, there are also reasons for concern, as the contemporary

ecological crisis demonstrates. The root of this crisis can be viewed from two perspectives, the intellectual and the technological.

4.1. The intellectual roots of the ecological crisis

This root cause is based mainly on people's mental orientation and some metaphysical suppositions which shape human conceptions and attitudes to reality. Two factors can be adduced here:

4.1.1. Genesis 1.28 ('to subdue' and 'to have dominion')

This passage has sometimes been misinterpreted and erroneously applied as a justification of the abuse of the environment and the plundering of nature. Some have taken this divine injunction as blanket permission to exploit the environment. Schillebeeckx observes this to be the case among some Western Christians. He says that "with the rise of bourgeois capitalism among Western Christians this biblical text has often been misused to legitimate the exploitation and pollution of nature" [5]. By becoming a plunderer instead of a steward, human beings lose an essential aspect of their existence. John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, on June 10, 2002, signed a common declaration on environmental ethics, titled, 'The Environmental Crisis: A Betrayal of God's Mandate', wherein they argued that humankind has only but limited sovereignty over creation. Their task, far from plundering, is to "cooperate with Him [God] in realizing more and more fully the divine purpose for creation" [6].

4.1.2. The dichotomy between matter and spirit

Another attitudinal disposition based on a philosophical-cum-theological outlook on life is the dichotomy between matter and spirit as radically opposed to each other. Plato places matter and spirit in a combative tension and avers that dematerialization is the goal of human life. In some religious circles, matter designates evil, and so has not much intrinsic worth except the value of its serviceability to human needs. As a result of this, humans tend to deal with the material Universe in terms of the benefits to them, unmindful of creation's inherent dignity and worth.

4.2. The technological roots of the ecological crisis

Unarguably, technology is the foremost and direct cause of environmental degradation in our time. Among the factors responsible for technology's disastrous contribution to human degradation and environmental deterioration are:

4.2.1. Technocratic rationality

Instrumental reason undergirds technical manipulations. And a technocratic culture, often obsessed with innovation and progress, thrives, as Johannes-Baptist Metz notes, on a technocratic rationality; that is, a rationality determined by the pervasive principle of exchange. In line with this principle, the supreme public values are utility and productivity. Not everything counts – what counts is progress and utility, productivity and profitability – and everything is subordinated “to the rules of the exchange game” [7]. The consequence is a socio-political life that is characterized by utilitarianism, domination and subjugation.

This principle comes to expression in the consumerist culture which nurtures a life-style that is, by and large, harmful to the environment through, for example, excessive energy consumption, industrial and domestic wastes, chemical emissions such as carbon monoxide. John Paul II notes that consumerism breeds disorder and ecological problems. According to him: “In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the Earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way.” [8] There is no sign that this culture is ending any soon, and so neither are its negative effects likely to disappear any sooner.

4.2.2. The destructive potentiality of scientific techniques

It is not technology (which has greatly advanced the course of human history and defined the contemporary form of existence) that is bad, but its indiscriminate and offensive application that is adversely affecting environmental life. In some developing countries, there are still destructive and wasteful gas flares, oil spills, land and water pollution, rain forest destruction and loss of the natural habitat etc. These have serious effects on the ecosystem and on life in general. The problem is greater in industrialized countries. John Paul II notes that: “The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related ‘greenhouse effect’ has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. Industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants: all of these are known to harm the atmosphere and environment. The resulting meteorological and atmospheric changes range from damage to health to the possible future submersion of low-lying lands.” [9]

The International Theological Commission assesses the effect of technological advancements thus: “Accelerated scientific and technological advances ... have produced a radically new situation for all living things on our planet. Along with the material abundance, higher living standards, better health and longer life spans have come air and water pollution, toxic industrial wastage, exploitation and sometimes destruction of delicate habitats.” [3, no. 71]

4.2.3. Disrespect for life

Although the goal of scientific exploits is well-being, some operational practices have proved harmful to human as well as animal life. There is “uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life”, [10, no. 7] but there is also the prioritization of economic gain over human dignity and welfare. The technocratic pragmatic mentality has objectified the human person and considers her or him as one among the instruments of production. The effect is that “often the health needs of workers are subordinated to utilitarian values of profit and production such that economic interest overrides the good of the human person and even of entire populations” [1, p. 239]

Despite the enormous advantages of technological developments, it is evident that if moral insights and eco-centric ethics are lacking, there is the danger that the on-going deterioration of the natural environment will be disastrous for the future of humankind. There is, therefore, need to re-assess our appreciation of the material universe as having value and as deserving of respect. Whether humankind is seen as made from the dust of Earth or as a product of stardust, one thing is certain: “We are radically interrelated with the Universe.” [10] If, as Morales avers, humankind “has cut himself off too much from nature, and ... really does need to insert himself into nature once more,” [1, p. 250] might not the resurrection of Jesus serve as a platform for a renewed vision of the integrity of creation and the needed integration that promotes the harmonious whole?

5. Creation and the mystery of Jesus’ Event

5.1. Creation and Incarnation

The prologue of John’s gospel brings together in the mystery of creation: God, the Word and the emergent creatures (John 1.1-3). God out of love creates through his creative Word. Creation is, therefore, intrinsically related to God’s Word as to God’s love. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (v. 14) In Jesus, the creative Word of God takes on the form of human creatureliness and forms part of God’s tangible creation. In him, the Creator and the created unite; and in him, “the anonymity of God’s invisible face takes on human features ... that we can recognize” [11]. Albeit in human form, Jesus as the incarnation of God’s love discloses the very being of God and shows God as one always on the side of his contingent creation. Found in the midst of creatures, the incarnate Jesus becomes the ultimate expression of God’s love for his creation.

In his person, Jesus stands as the source, centre and apex of creation. Schillebeeckx speaks of the ‘creature Jesus’ as ‘condensed creation’ [12]. As the source of their being, the whole creation looks to him as towards their goal. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus brings creation to its consummation; thereby becoming “the man in whom the task of creation has

been successfully accomplished” [13]. Incarnation dignifies creation and allows it to shine with remarkable splendour.

5.2. Resurrection and the renewal of Creation

5.2.1. Understanding the Resurrection

Obviously, the resurrection of Jesus cannot be easily defined. (It has been observed that ‘Resurrection’, the English designate of the Greek ‘*egeiro*’ which means ‘to rise’ [as from sleep] is a descriptive term, a metaphor; and not an analytical concept subject to categorical definition. Thus, Paul Avis sees resurrection as a metaphor that is used to describe the fact of putting Jesus back on his feet so to speak [14]. Andrew Chester sees it as imagery representing the fact of ‘recreation and transformation of the individual [15]. And for Mary D’Angelo, the “metaphor focuses on the resumption, the renewal, of a life that has been interrupted” [16].) These nuances serve to show the reality of the unfathomable inner essence of what the term ‘Resurrection’ represents. To some extent, it can be described albeit never exhaustively. The hope of resurrection which characterizes the faith of the Jewish people would not serve to determine the reality of this event in the case of Jesus.

However, Gerald O’Collins attempts a description of Resurrection thus: “Through a *unique divine action* which set the *ultimate seal of approval* on his life and work, Jesus was personally *delivered from the state of death*. With his earthly *body transformed* and taken up into a *new, glorified existence*, he thus initiated *the end of all things* for human beings and their world.” [17]

There are six features implied in this description of the Resurrection of Jesus. Two features are particularly striking for our present study, namely, (i) the definitive action of God in bringing about (ii) a transformed new existence for Jesus. Resurrection is a unique divine re-creative act. God did this with the same love with which he created the world. Resurrection exalts the humanity of Jesus to divine status, beyond physicalities, death and any oppressive forces. It is, thus, an eschatological event. Paul describes the risen Jesus as “the first-born of all creation” (Colossians 1.15).

5.2.2. Creation and Resurrection

There is, therefore, a connection between Creation and Resurrection. In the first place, both belong to God’s creative act. He is God the Creator and the Resurrector. In each case, a new reality emerges. While the first creation was *ex-nihilo*, the second was *via* radical and profound transformation. Here, then, the eschatological dawns with re-creation. O’Collins expresses his understanding of the two ‘creations’ thus: “In creating the material world, with Adam and Eve as its high point, God called into existence what had not yet existed. In re-creating the world through resurrection, God calls to a new existence what has existed but is now dead.” [17, p. 8]

Right from the tomb, therefore, God was acting to bring about new creation. Since the incarnation links Jesus with the whole created order, the redemptive import of his Resurrection brings renewal, not only to humankind, but also to the entire creation. In his Resurrection, the whole creation has been given a “new, transformed, and definitive life” [18]. Creation has, thus, been further dignified.

In his *Catholicism*, O’Collins affirms that the whole mystery of the Christ-event, that is, his “life, death, and resurrection, and sending of the Spirit that followed, transformed the physical, bodily reality of the created world” [19]. This is concretely evident in the sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist, where Jesus unifies in his being, certain material realities of the physical world, constituting especially the bread and wine into his body and blood.

5.3. The implications of Resurrection for human beings and their world

Jesus’ Resurrection, which, according to O’Collins, “initiates the new creation and constitutes the beginning of the end of all things,” is still an on-going process that will be completed when it “becomes fully a reality for the human race and its world” [17, p. vii]. Within this on-going resurrection, both the human race and its world are integrated and are continually moving towards their eschatological fulfilment. For O’Collins, the first Easter “began the work of finally bringing our universe home” and we are called to collaborate in this movement [20].

Likewise, John Dominic Crossan sees Resurrection as God’s cleansing act. For him, Resurrection “means that God’s Great Clean-Up of a world ... has already begun and it involves a period of human time from start to finish rather than an all-encompassing instant of divine time.” [21] Here, Crossan reiterates O’Collins’ claim that Resurrection is an on-going reality that ends when it becomes a reality for all. He, too, believes that resurrection does not only announce the beginning of God’s Great Cosmic Clean-Up but also invites human participation. This participation involves rescuing the world from every form of destructive and disintegrating force. In-between the first and the fulfilment, stand humankind’s activities, powered by the Spirit of the risen One.

5.4. Resurrection and the ecological question: Appropriating the integrity of Creation

Following the argument of Crossan, humankind is now in the era of a ‘second miracle’, that is, participation in the divine cleansing of the world of injustice, hatred, divisions, destruction, etc. Crossan calls God’s Resurrection of Jesus as the first miracle which is, at the same time, the beginning of God’s great cosmic clean-up; and he calls the human participation in this cosmic clean-up the second miracle. In other words, it is an honour and a privilege for human beings to be partners with God in bringing integrity and wholeness to the entire Creation [21]. Regarding the ecological question, it can be argued that the

Resurrection provides a theological basis for re-appropriating the integrity of Creation via recognition of the following motifs:

5.4.1. Christocentricism

The risen Jesus is the unity of all Creation. According to St Paul, it pleases God “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1.10). He “is the beginning,” “the firstborn of all creation,” “and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1.18, 15, 17). Faith assures us that Creation has been ennobled and dignified by the Christ-event. By his Resurrection, he has constituted the whole creation into one eschatological family, and through his exaltation, a dimension of creation entered into the very being of God. Everything is directed to him as to their source and goal. John Feehan speaks of the entire Creation as constituting a kind of family characterized by the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood: “We are brother and sister, elephant and wolf and man and woman, oak and dandelion, frog and dragonfly.” [22]

5.4.2. Accountability

As a historical event, Jesus’ Resurrection is an irruption of the eschatological within history, constituting the present as the history of the end-time. The hidden presence of the eschatological invites collaboration as the human response to the exigency of the new moment. Arland Hultgren argues that “eschatology is related directly to accountability” [23] not merely in the sense of being accountable to the One who is superior to us, but also in terms of our responsibility towards ourselves, others and to things. Humankind is called to accountability that derives from their responsibility for the things in nature. This is an invitation for humankind to deal with Creation in line with Creation’s movement towards its ultimate fulfilment. God has initiated a project in which human beings are called to collaborate by living “the radical ethics of a new creation” [21, p. 178].

5.4.3. Living the radical ethics of a new Creation

The redemption and renewal of the created order demand that humankind adopt a contemplative attitude in their relation to creation as a whole. O’Collins speaks of the resurrection as putting ‘new shoes on our feet’, so that we can ‘walk in a new way’ and a ‘new song into our mouth’, so that we can ‘sing his new song of joy’ [24]. Human beings ought to deal with Creation with love and utmost sense of reverence. They should recognize and appreciate that in the risen One, creation has regained its beauty and splendour; and that each, in its own right, radiates the beauty and serenity of its maker. Schillebeeckx sees the Creation as pleading for mercy. According to him: “[T]he creation looks for the redemptive moment when human beings will finally have mercy on it as good

shepherds, caring stewards, so that the cosmos too can take its breath again (Romans 8).” [5]

Christians live in the light of the mystery of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. By incarnation, they believe that in assuming the human nature, Jesus embraces in a real but mysterious way all other lives in Creation, as well as other creatures. His cross stands as symbol of God’s suffering with the endangered group; while the Resurrection speaks of victory, wholeness, peace and abundant life. The mystery of Christ forms the Christian outlook on things. In the face of the present ecological crisis, certain things are required:

5.4.3.1. Earth-friendly philosophies and theologies

The regard we give to things and the position we take on issues depend on our fundamental beliefs and convictions. As a result, there is need to overcome the unhealthy objectification of the material Universe as merely fit for plunder. Creation needs to be seen from the view-point of renewal bestowed on it by the resurrection. Primarily, it has its inherent right to be. All creatures have their purpose in God’s plan; and they all sing the same new song of joy “to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb,” saying: “... blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!” (Apocalypse 5.13)

5.4.3.2. Developing an ‘ecological’ conscience

Moreover, the Resurrection assures us of our co-belonging with other things in nature. Humankind needs to develop not only a sense of ‘kinship’ with Creation, but also to discover and respect the inherent value each thing has before God and to acknowledge the betrayal of trust which misuse exemplifies. It may seem naïve to modern sensibilities, but, Franciscan spirituality represents a renewed outlook on creation that promotes healthy eco-systemic existence. By Franciscan spirituality, I mean the acceptance of all creatures as either a ‘brother’ or a ‘sister’ (as is evidenced in his *Canticle of the Sun*) such that one can see an ass and recognize that he/she has seen a ‘brother ass’ and not a brute beast of burden. St Francis has deep appreciation of nature, the environment and all creatures. No wonder he is often called the ‘patron of natural conservation’. [25] Humankind needs to re-appreciate the value of their co-creatures and promote a healthy mutual interdependence.

5.4.3.3. Temperance

Respecting the integrity of Creation does not prohibit the use of earthly things. Human ingenuity and creativity must continue and earthly things must continue to play their instrumental roles. However, human beings should proceed prudently and temperately, and use things in their God-intended way. Utilitarian motives should not override the concern for our common destiny, the future of humankind and of our Universe.

5.4.3.4. True love for all things

Creation and redemption are acts of divine love. In Christ, God loves and redeems all Creation. Redemption transcends death and confers life. Life, soundness, integrity is what the resurrection promises. True love of God is reflected in the love for all things and it demands a caring and creative stewardship. It rejects systematic destruction of the eco-system; discourages air, land and sea pollution and other activities harmful to the biosphere. It calls for a change of attitude that assures the integral well-being of our Universe for a better future for humanity and its world.

6. Conclusions

The wholeness which the Resurrection bestows on Creation demands from humankind a style of life that responds to the eschatological in history; and this involves triple conversions – spiritual, moral and economic. Spiritual conversion enables humankind to see reality from the divine perspective; while moral conversion calls for a change of heart that enables one to relate to others or things in an ethically accepted way; and economic conversion demands a change in life-style amidst technocratic and consumerist culture. These conversions – which call for ever-greater integration – nurture a life-style which promotes justice, peace, harmony, respect and reconciliation with all things in Christ. Creation is moving to its definitive fulfilment, and humankind is called to cooperate and aid this movement. That is the Resurrection summons.

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