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THE ETHICAL CONSUMER AND THE RELIGIOUS NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING

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Abstract

Consumption cannot simply be defined in terms of the utilitarian functions of rational economic processes, but in parallel by its ethical and symbolic dimensions. Consumption is a social phenomenon with the pervasive influence of values, norms, customs, traditions, beliefs and other forms of cultural, psychological and spiritual ways of life. Against the background of a hyper-consumerist society, predatory capitalism and the reality of ecological threats, the motivation is intensifying for ethical consumption: ecologically friendly ways of life taking the form of deliberate and voluntary frugality and environmentalism. This study aims to demonstrate the presence and function of Christian values in environmental thinking and to re-examine Christian anthropocentrism as a consistent component of environmentalism. At the same time, through the lens of environmental virtue ethics, I present an argument that strips Christian anthropocentrism of its label as an alleged source of ecological threats and instead refer here to the potential of humanity as caretakers and protectors of Nature. This is illustrated using biblical verses on the emblematic figures of the Good Steward and the Good Shepherd, expressing the responsible and environmentally oriented relationship of humanity to nature.

Keywords: virtue, ethics, deontology, Christianity, intentional frugality

1. Introduction

Economic theories view markets primarily through the lens of their instrumental and rational substance, determined by the impersonal principles of economic forces and interests and the predictably operating mechanisms of supply and demand, as well as by the principles of economically motivated consumers, who in the spirit of rational choice theory seek in every situation of consumer decision-making to maximize their own benefit and individual welfare. Yet, this perspective is difficult to sustain in a global economy, as it does not reflect consumption and production as social phenomena. The reason is that economic fields are closely linked to the social space, where there are far more motivations for human behaviour than merely purpose-rational motivations in the sense of egoistic pursuit of individual interests and escalation of

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hedonistic values. In the social space, the structures of social norms, traditions, and customs are meaningfully actualized, as are their associated psychological, religious, or spiritual life functions. Consumption therefore cannot be simplistically perceived as merely an economically rationalized function of the organization of production and distribution [1].

Here the consumer is not seen as an object of manipulation and a product of the supra-individual force of market pressure operating rationally, a puppet devoid of free will hypnotized by advertising, a passive consumer dominated by superficial material motivations and drives. Rather the consumer is a reflective actor actively shaping the discursive framework of consumption, who is capable of freely experiencing and critically interpreting his or her own experiences and projecting these into attitudes towards the surrounding world. Such a consumer is able to take responsibility for the world around him or her and at the same time to shape that world through his or her actions.

The ethical dimension of goods and services is becoming the measure for evaluating them in the contemporary consumer culture of green shopping [2].

As such, the purchase of products is not necessarily a process based only on economic considerations of convenience or the quality of the benefit provided, but also on non-material motivations of symbolic significance that reflect political, religious, cultural, or ecological values and norms. Similar value-based motivations for buying and consumption, however, can be seen as irrational from the perspective of the principles of economic behaviour and the laws of supply and demand [3].

As a result, terms are appearing in the academic literature that establish a foundation for the concept of a civilly engaged political consumer, such as "second-hand buyer" [4], "socially responsible consumption" [5], "voluntary frugality" [6], "minimalist living" [7], not to mention "sustainable consumption and development" [8], "sharing economy" [9], "ethical consumption" [10] and last but not least, "shared consumption" [11].

The fact that consumption has an important ethical dimension and is not merely an economic but also a social phenomenon, is demonstrated by Pattaro and Setiffi in a detailed analysis of several hundred peer-reviewed academic texts focusing on consumption issues published in international scientific journals [12].

There is growing interest in all manner of sociological, anthropological, environmental, and psychological fields of research in addressing the symbolic importance of consumption in the process of social role and identity formation [13]. In this context, various environmental or religious movements and civic initiatives are gaining strength, motivated by the dematerialization of human values and the transformation of consumer culture norms to correct the hedonistic lifestyle based on unlimited consumption of goods and services. More radical anti-consumerist attitudes are also emerging in the form of protests and waves of boycotts of various types of products [14].

Christian faith is also an integral part of environmentally motivated consumer thinking and the formation of eco-friendly lifestyles. As such, environmental thinking cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension of the person and his or her relationship to the universe and transcendent values of suprapersonal significance. On the contrary, the relationship to Nature and the motivation for ecologically friendly living often has a religious basis, and faith is becoming a decisive source of action in this space. This interconnectedness can be seen, for example, in the direct active support of the ecological movement of the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I, also referred to as the 'Green Patriarch'. His ecological positions are even the subject of academic study in terms of the sociological relevance and social significance of his texts and speeches [15]. The integration of theological motives and environmental issues can also be observed when examining the effects of climate change on Christian holy sites around the world or addressing the relationship between ecological threats, climate risks, and the failures of political measures and international treaties to protect the environment on one hand, and the need to change the consumer mentality of consumers and bring them closer to the spiritual values and ethics of universalistic values of humanity and the defence of nature as a pan-human source of life.

The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the religious nature of environmental thinking and the influence of Christian faith on the environmental motivations of consumers consisting of loyalty to nature and ecological values in an era of global climate change that has been substantially initiated and accelerated by anthropogenic influences stemming from the conditions of a hyper-consumer society. We seek to challenge the stereotypically accepted environmentalist critique focused on Christian notions of anthropocentrism. Indeed, it is precisely Christian anthropocentrism that is often identified in sociological and ecological debates as one of the most significant barriers to the relationship between Christians and environmentalists. This is due to the notion of Christian anthropocentrism as the ideological basis for progress and prosperity, and at the same time man's wanton subjugation and exploitation of Nature as a resource to achieve these goals, which is leading in turn to an inevitable ecological crisis. Yet such a perspective is very simplistic and in need of revision.

We are therefore supporting a little-reflected thesis here, elaborated particularly in the field of environmental ethics and theological research, in which the human being retains a central position through the Christian lens of anthropocentrism while preserving a sensitive and protective relationship with nature. I demonstrate this here with the help of Bible verses and the emblematic figures of the Good Steward and the Good Shepherd. At the same time, I deepen and expand the generally accepted paradigmatic structure of consumption by adding an additional, deontologically motivated dimension of eco-conscious and responsible consumption. This is reinforced by environmental virtue ethics in the form of deliberate and voluntary frugality, implicitly incorporating certain Christian values in the form of asceticism or the preference of religious and

spiritual goals over the consumerist hedonism of material values, representing active forces of resistance to the hypertrophied consumerism of predatory capitalism as the real source of ecological threats.

2. The ethical consumer and the moralization of markets

The moralization of markets and the increasing demand for ethical consumption are most likely related to the simultaneous effects of the rise of information and communication technologies and rising levels of education and affluence [16].

First, the advancement and global reach of communication technologies has enabled access to an almost unlimited amount of data, information, news, and lay and expert discussion or commentary related to the nature of products and the circumstances of their production and manufacture. Moreover at the same time has enabled the active networking of different groups of engaged consumers sharing similar beliefs on consumption and purchasing issues. Second, the growing level of education in economically developed countries elevates the general level of knowledge about the situation in the world, environmental problems, quality of life and working conditions in different countries, which increases the self-initiative and active commitment to make a difference. Third, the moralization of markets is further supported by the conditions of increasing material security in affluent societies. Over the course of the 20th century, expenditure on providing basic necessities (housing, food, clothing) gradually declined from the original 80% of monthly income to a range of 30-40% of these costs, accompanied by an increase in real wages to almost five times earlier incomes [17].

Growing affluence not only democratizes consumption and allows an increasing proportion of the population to participate in a consumerist lifestyle as part of a consumer culture, but also leads to the expansion and availability of a more diverse assortment of goods and services [18]. The variability of consumer goods thus includes less traditional products as well, including those that may be associated with ethical values.

In discourse on consumer culture we find a range of theories of purchasing and concepts of consumerism. According to Wilk, three basic paradigms of consumption can be identified within the plurality of these approaches [19]. First, consumption is defined purely as an economic phenomenon, relying on rational choice theory and the purpose-rational actions of the consumer. The consumption patterns here are determined in a utilitarian way with the goal of maximizing one's own welfare and individually preferred values and interests. Each specific consumer decision is the result of a functioning hierarchy of individual priorities and preferences, which are rationally and purposefully applied by the individual, regardless of the number of options from which the consumer is making the decision. Second, consumption is understood primarily as a social phenomenon, constructing and reconstructing interpersonal relationships, co-determining social status, forming

subcultures, modelling different orientations of lifestyle politics and self-expression. Consumption here represents a certain social code defining the boundaries of different social groups, the mutual definition and affirmation of one's own belonging to a certain society, and awareness of a collective identity. Third, consumption is understood as a form of symbolic behaviour and a cultural means of expressing areas of non-material importance in different aspects of life. Here it becomes an important force in determining the social order and cultural system of society, yet at the same time also represents a reproductive component of society. People use products as the source of a specific form of communication with the environment, representing their feelings, moods, beliefs, and attitudes, characterized by a ritualistic nature and a constant practice of decommodification. According to Max Weber's well-known typology of actions, the above paradigms of consumption can be identified with purpose-rational action in the case of an economic approach and with value-rational action in the case of a social and cultural paradigm of consumption [20]. I seek to demonstrate that the economic, social and cultural perspectives of consumption can be further extended to include an ethical perspective, represented simultaneously by Christian values of religious faith and beliefs about collective responsibility, built on duties and commitments to social norms, traditions, and beliefs, containing a spiritual dimension, and directed towards transcendental goals. In the sense of Weber's typology, action has no rational essence and corresponds to a type of traditional action. In this case, the motivation of the ethical consumer is always deontological [21]. The ethical consumer accepts certain constraints, rationalizes purchasing acts (or refuses such acts in a similarly rational manner), and moderates consumption decisions through internal beliefs, values, and ethical norms. The consumer controls the circumstances of his or her own consumption, evaluating and anticipating its social, environmental, and ethical consequences, including his or her own experience and coherence with an internalized value structure.

A very significant common element of ethical consumption is the acceptance and, to varying degrees and intensities, the practical application of the principles of voluntary or deliberate frugality, representing two distinct concepts of lifestyle. Both voluntary and deliberate frugality represent alternative attitudes toward life in consumerist affluent societies, preferring to limit quantities of consumption and promote quality of life at its non-material levels, including active protection and defence of the environment and concern for the well-being of others [22]. Here the promotion of a 'green' way of life is based on a personal belief that things can actively change for the new and better. There are clear similarities with Christianity in the deep inner beliefs of ethical consumers and environmentalists in general in the chance to repair and improve the world, including their shared and under-recognized relationship to the Universe.

3. Environmental virtue ethics - deliberate and voluntary frugality

Virtue ethics were originally based on an individualistically motivated approach of tending to growth in the area of interpersonal relationships but is now becoming a specific branch of concern for the welfare of nature in the form of environmental virtue ethics [23]. Virtue ethics have thus become a broader life strategy, an individual mind-set for a way of life that includes efforts to tend to extra-personal goals and interests of societal importance. It typically concentrates on the values of universalism (understanding, appreciation of life, tolerance, and protection of the environment and human welfare), benevolence (protection and promotion of the well-being of those with whom we are in daily contact) and conformity (self-restraint in actions and tastes) [24]. In other words, it is simultaneously oriented towards those values firmly rooted in Christian doctrine. Thus, environmental virtue ethics is characterized by the significant potential of Christian values.

The first concept of virtue ethics is intentional frugality, in Max Weber's typology of ideal types of action corresponding most likely to its value-rational variant. It is part of the civically engaged Aristotelian ethics, oriented towards the well-being of the community. It is closely intertwined with Christian ethics in its deontologically ascetic dimension. Deliberate frugality contrasts sharply with mainstream lifestyles and the hedonistic ethos of consumerism, directly and indirectly devastating natural resources. It is becoming the source of ecologically active and civically engaged movements, an oppositional counterculture to the universally shared consumerism of ambitious consumers aspiring to an ever-increasing share of consumer culture, driven by the economic power of globally operating multinationals. It corresponds to the model of the 'negative' consumer, boycotting consumption and protesting the consumerist way of life. This model universally rejects the principles of conventional economics and the ideology of constant economic growth. In its moderate form, it appeals through various movements, initiatives, and actions to limit and reduce consumption (e.g. Buy Nothing Day, Zero Waste, Adbusters), while in its more radical form it promotes and defends lifestyle practices that sometimes quite drastically minimize participation in consumerism (e.g. squatting or freeganism). A negative/rejectionist pattern of consumer behaviour is usually not motivated by individual choices, but rather practiced on the basis of collective actions, subcultural life and variously organized and planned actions, campaigns and protests, such as accusing producers and sellers of unethical or socially and environmentally harmful behaviour.

Voluntary frugality is the second of the foundational lifestyle concepts that represents an integrated part of virtue ethics as a type of motivation for environmental action [21, p. 47].

Unlike deliberate frugality, voluntary frugality lacks the impulse of asceticism, although it of course corresponds to the same value-rational type of action. It is based on non-ascetic approaches to life, preferring the principle of 'enjoyment', of course to a rationally limited degree, and physical and mental

pleasures, following the ancient tradition of the philosophical program of the hedonistic school of Epicureans, Cynics, and Sceptics. The enrichment of life often comes from the non-material realm of existence and most likely finds its application in the aesthetic and spiritual realm. Frugality and an economical and considerate way of life are not seen as self-limiting or even a nuisance, but as an appealing, enjoyable, and fulfilling alternative life orientation, providing positive emotions and enjoyment of life. Preferences for frugality, economy, and a willingness to delay sensual pleasures are here loosely intertwined with the principles of Protestant ethics, thus inspiring some aspects of the virtue ethics of voluntary frugality. There is also a typical inclination towards artistic activity, admiration of aesthetic values, and adherence to various religious trends as sources of 'private faith' and individual satisfaction of spiritual needs. It lacks the more pronounced manifestations of subcultural life, the collective dimension of civically engaged movements, publicly criticizing the unethical practices of companies and boycotting their products but is instead based on different variations of individual strategies of consumer decision-making and non-conflicting initiatives of direct support for ethical purchasing (e.g. fair-trade or organic products). The principle of voluntary frugality is 'living richly by frugal means'.

4. Deontological motivation and the religious nature of environmental thinking

According to O'Neill, Holland and Light, in addition to virtue ethics, another motivation for environmental thinking and behaviour is deontological motivation [25]. This is based on traditions and commitments to social norms, cultural practices, and preferred community values. It is based on an awareness of the richness of natural values and an implicit belief in the need to maintain a considerate, conservationist, and generally respectful approach to the environment. A significant component of deontological motivation is the Christian religious attitude towards the world. According to Dunlap, efforts to protect nature rest on belief in the existence of an invisible order and the conviction that the highest good is most likely to be achieved by conforming harmoniously to such an order [26]. A deontologically guided relationship with nature is a relationship of solidarity and compassion as the basic parameters of a culture shaped for millennia by Christian values. Nature is treated as a gift and with admiration for its magnificence and perfection. According to Librová, "The consequence is a deontological attitude, a commitment, an obligatory gratitude of the believer for creation. I treat Nature sparingly because I must be grateful for it to God, its Creator." [21, p. 51]

The fact that environmentalists and Christians share a number of commonalities in the form of striving to live frugally and considerately, or to live in solidarity and empathy with the weak and disabled, leads me to believe that it can be argued within a within a deontological approach to Nature that environmentalism has a religious basis. According to Dunlop, the sacredness of

Nature enters into everyday life and although environmental movements masquerade as political movements and environmentalists argue mainly for the interests of society, they fundamentally relate to the Universe in a way similar to that of religious people [27]. Environmentalists see the devastation and gradual disappearance of wild nature as a symptom of a deep spiritual crisis. They utter various cautionary prophecies, sceptical predictions of catastrophes, and at the same time promise an earthly paradise provided humanity undergoes a spiritual change.

It has long been assumed that the relationship between environmentalists and Christians is complicated by two related circumstances that can significantly distort the relationship. The first is the Calvinist conception of work ethic and the second is the problem of anthropocentrism. In Calvinism, the Lord's favour is manifested by success in work. Within the Calvinist interpretation, work, performance, and the active transformation of the natural world by man are what is to be valued and fulfilled as a life mission. Conversely, a passive approach to nature and the physical world of objects is considered a grave sin in the Calvinist tradition. The environmentalist critique then targets humans and their laborious efforts to shape and reshape the world around them as the source of the ecological crisis. Related to this is the phenomenon of anthropocentrism, deeply rooted in Christianity and oriented towards ideas of human progress and prosperity, which environmentalists argue inevitably leads to the devastation of nature and the exploitation of natural resources. However, this very simplistic view is being overcome through the elaboration of the ethics of environmentalism and theological inquiry. It is Christianity that "enriches environmental ethics by what perspective of anthropocentrism it offers in its hopeful and moderate versions" [21, p. 60]. In such a conception, man is given a central role, but the protection and defence of Nature becomes a key value for him.

The basis of biblical anthropocentrism is found in Genesis: "Then God said: Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1.26).

What then is the biblical basis of anthropocentrism and why, using the Bible, can anthropocentrism be interpreted as a bridge between Christians and environmentalists rather than as a barrier between them?

4.1. The Good Steward

Interpreters of Scripture have formulated two emblematic figures expressing man's relationship to Nature: the figure of the Good Steward and the figure of the Good Shepherd. The figure of the Good Steward is captured by a verse from Genesis: "The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Genesis 2.15).

The figure of the Good Steward is a metaphor for the specific relationship of man to Nature as a protector of what God has created; yet at the same time, man cannot claim to be anything other than a caretaker. The equivalent of the Christian Good Steward is the contemporary ecopragmatist. The latter seeks to

manage ecosystems and intervenes in natural processes and states in order to stabilize, maintain, or conversely to change and accelerate. The ecopragmatist solves ecological problems by seeking technological solutions, using scientific knowledge and believing that such interventions will serve both for the preservation of Nature and the development and prosperity of humanity. The ecopragmatist introduces various technologies, manipulates genetics, engages in the use of nanotechnology and geoengineering, and in recent years has applied scientific knowledge of synthetic biology. However, this does not reflect the fact that natural processes are complex, difficult to grasp in their complexity at the current state of scientific knowledge, and not easily predictable. The ecopragmatist's cognitive ability is therefore not only quite limited, but also burdened with a number of risks that are invisible and hard to predict, taking the form of unintended side effects arising from such interventions within the ecosystem. In spite of these limits, however, the ecopragmatist - the Good Steward - is ready to actively protect and preserve Nature and, with the help of the most modern scientific knowledge, to stimulate natural processes and take initiative in moderating such processes with a rational vision of technological management of nature by humanity.

4.2. The Good Shepherd

The biblical metaphor of the Good Shepherd is unlike the purposeful Good Steward/ecopragmatist, references spontaneity, emotion, kindness and faithfulness. It identifies with selflessness, love, altruistic help to one's neighbours and solidarity with the weak. It corresponds to an environmental virtue ethic based on benevolence, tolerance and maximum respect for Nature. It is a loving relationship with Nature, both the living and the non-living, similar to the life philosophy and practice of Albert Schweitzer [28]. The essential feature here is an environmental altruism oriented towards the protection of habitats or the rescue of endangered animals, which, unlike altruism towards human beings, does not allow for an act of reciprocity. Thus, it cannot be a source of gratitude or other reciprocal satisfaction in this impersonal mode. The compensation for such unconditional environmental altruism can be found in the Christian sacrifice of Christ, which forms the common ground of Christian and environmentalist thought and action. In the Gospel of John we read: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (John 10.16).

Most ministers and preachers interpret this Gospel verse as a loving mutuality of Christians of different types of denominations, and in the extreme case, believers of other types of non-Christian religions. Less often, the interpretation is that the 'sheep of another fold' are also non-human creatures, also our neighbours deserving of our attention and care. This is why many practicing Christians so often express a loving relationship with the living creatures of Nature. The Good Shepherd cannot be an ecopragmatist relying on science as a reliable source of knowledge but remains always a person who will

care for Nature and living creatures out of pure altruism and without expectation of reciprocity.

5. Conclusions

The moralization of markets and the related ethical consumption and development of environmental thinking among consumers is a process of global dimension and significance, where moral and ethical objectives are increasingly preferred alongside economic values. In the complex interaction of markets, culture and society, under conditions of growing affluence, the removal of material barriers in favour of free consumer choice, increasing levels of education, the mass diffusion and use of digital technologies, consumer behaviour and purchasing patterns are changing in favour of their ethical values and moral standards. A new paradigm of consumption is emerging. In addition to its economic, social, and cultural conception, ever more space is given to ethical consumption, based on deeper ideas of environmental thinking that are closely linked to the values of the Christian faith. Environmentalism is sometimes incorrectly and simplistically interpreted in sociological and ecological discourse as being opposed to Christianity. In particular, there appears in the environmentalist perspective a critique of Christian anthropocentrism in which man is said to play a devastating role toward Nature with the aim of exploiting and colonizing it to fulfil notions of progress and prosperity. To this a critique is loosely added of the Calvinist conception of work ethic and the value of work performance in the sense of transforming the natural world and man's insensitive intervention in natural processes motivated by the achievement of material value. This critique needs to be revised and its factual deficiencies demonstrated. In reality, the relationship between environmental thinking and Christian values is not nearly so conflicted. Environmental virtue ethics and theological investigations point to Christian anthropocentrism as an ideological trend coherent with the principles of environmentalism, whereby the role of humanity in relation to nature references human nurturing and protective tendencies. This can be illustrated using the Bible through the symbolic figures of the Good Steward and the Good Shepherd. The Good Steward represents the ecopragmatist in modern terms, whereas the Good Shepherd appeals to the attitudes of the altruistic and emotional environmentalist. At the same time, Christian values are loosely intertwined with ecologically oriented lifestyles in the form of intentional and voluntary frugality, where environmentalist motivations and Christian values are in coherent interplay.

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