

God, the Bible and the Environment

An Historical Excursus on the Relationship between Christian Religion and Ecology

Marco Damonte

Professor of Tendencies of Contemporary Thought, University of Genoa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is double. On the one hand, it focuses on the relationship between Christian religion and ecology in order to inquire into the most common charges that environmentalist movements address to Christians and to evaluate them showing their historical roots. On the other, this study will show how some recent suggestions taken from Catholic authors – who, at the same time, are the traditional ones – and from the teachings of the Church, could be useful to encourage and to promote ecological ethics founded on human responsibility. In order to do so, an historical method will be used. In the first part, some authors from the Patristic-Scholastic age will be taken into consideration, with particular care to Augustine. In the second part an article by Lynn White will be presented as an emblematic turning point in the relationship between Christian religion and ecologists, paying attention first, to the Puritan context of his writings, and, second, to the birth of contemporary environmentalist theories. In the last part Romano Guardini's work and Francis' "Laudato si'" will be considered. My attention will be focused on the interpretation of some relevant verses taken from the Bible book of Genesis.

Keywords: ecology, ethics of environment, Patristic age, Augustine, Romano Guardini, Bible, Christian religion, Puritans, Lynn White, power (in modern age).

1. FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO MODERN AGE

The most direct way to appreciate the way in which Christian thinkers have conceived the relationship between humans and the world or, better, creation, is to take their interpretation of Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 into consideration. These two verses in fact include the verbs that characterize the actions prescribed by God to persons in order to regulate their behaviour towards all other creatures.

1.1. *The Patristic age*

A complete study of the Patristic age should include the great number of Christian authors until the Ninth century¹. My aim here is more modest and includes only thinkers quoted in the most relevant anthologies of biblical commentary (Louth 2001, 67-70). Bede (672-735), in the first book of his *Commentary on Genesis*, offers a sort of literal interpretation, according to which there are two ages: in the first one animals and humans lived in harmony; in the second one they are in conflict with one another. The distinction between these two eras consists in the free decision of people to obey divine command or not, and this is confirmed by the fact that also in the second age the saints have control over damage caused by wild beasts. The strategy of Cappadocian Fathers is to read the relationship between human beings and nature in an allegoric way. For example, Gregory Nissen (335-395) in *On the Creation of Man* (18) affirms that in irrational animals we find human features that we have in virtue of our being created in the image and resemblance of God as rage, pleasure, cowardice, arrogance, burning desire to earn, fits of despair for a loss, and so on. In this fashion “having dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (*Gn* 1:28b) means that human beings must dominate the (wild) beasts that are in their hearts. In the same text (1, 36-37, 39), Gregory makes it clear that this capacity of controlling derives from God and it concerns both the self, in particular bad instincts and unfavourable dispositions, and other creatures because they could become objects of human concupiscence. John Chrysostom (349-407), in his *Homilies on Genesis* (10, 4), offers a different perspective. For him the authority over the animals is a sign of God’s love for mankind. And this for two reasons: first, because it is a way in which God offers part of his power to people and, second, because it is a manner to bless mankind. The power received from the creator must be a motive of wonder and in fact it testifies at the same time God’s magnanimity and human’s greatness. This greatness consists in the rational human nature and not in every human action. Also Ambrose of Milan (340-397) in *On Paradise* (11, 51-52) and John Chrysostom, in *Homilies on Genesis* (14, 4) suggest the same idea. They notice that this power is represented by the possibility given by God to Adam to name all animals and that this is also a way to indicate the responsibility that people have towards them.

¹ The bibliographical tool useful for this work is *Biblia Patristica. Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique*, vols. I-VII. Paris: CNRS, 1975-2000.

With regard to Genesis 2:15b, the verbs *to tend* and *to keep* are in general evaluated in the context of the metaphor between God and a gardener. Also, in this case God gives mankind his own (creative) power. For this reason Origen (184-253) in the *Commentary on John* (13, 240-241) says that only the perfect human created by God and not yet struck by original sin was able to take care of the garden and, in particular, of the tree of the life. According to Severian of Gabala (ca. 380-415) in his six sermons on the Creation (5, 5) tilling the soil is the same as complying to God's laws. Tending and keeping do not give people an arbitrary domain on nature, but they indicate that people have to work for the good and that this work is implied in their nature. Ephrem (ca. 306-373), one of the Syriac Father, followed by Procopio (469-515), dwells on considering the precepts of God the only thing Adam has to follow and, on the other hand the seductions of the Devil the only things to avoid (Neri 1995, 40-3). In the Middle Ages, Rupert of Deutz (1076-1129) specified that the work of mankind lies in the fulfillment of God's work, that is the work of faith, the task of hope and conforming to charity. As a consequence, what must be kept is faith and the love for God, the creator.

Contemporary textual criticism confirms these aspects starting from a lexical and an etymological point of view (Baricalla 1998). Moreover, comparing the first part of the book of Genesis with previous Western literature – in particular the *Enuma Elish* (Testa 1977, 271-3) –, exegetes underline that the task committed by God to mankind is not to use creation in order to serve Him, but to take care of creation in order to make it flourish. This should be the correct interpretation of Genesis 2:15, even if the language used is taken from the legal contract between an owner and his farmers.

1.2. *Augustine*

The relevance of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) for all following Western thought is the reason to take his writings into consideration in a specific section. To fix the context of his age is fundamental to understand it correctly. He wrote in an age when Manicheism was widespread. Manichees considered reality depend on two principles: the good and the bad ones. Moreover, in a gnostic perspective, they thought matter was totally negative. For this dualistic prejudice, they denied humans had received from God the control over beasts observing that on a lot of occasions animals injured humankind. Augustine, in his *On Genesis, a Refutation of Manichees* (1, 18, 29) rebuts that this type of control changed after original sin

and that, in any case it is necessary to distinguish corporeal harm, from spiritual harm. Individuals are vulnerable in their bodies, but mankind cannot be subjugated by wild beasts in virtue of its nature. *Dominating* is explained as the judging capacity that belongs to human spirituality and, specifically, to the intellect (Testa 1977, 288-9). People dominate nature in the way that they can and must approve what is right and condemn what is wrong in the light of the Spirit of God. If we find an apparent exaltation of human power, it is because the Manichees devalue human nature. In this fashion, Augustine, in the same text (*On Genesis, a Refutation of Manichees*, 2, 11, 15) underlines that work gives respectability to people and he remembers that only after original sin work became hard. At the beginning *tending* and *keeping* the garden were a pleasure and they were the way to develop humans's abilities which God gifted them with. The only commitment for people was to preserve what God had given them. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (8, 8) it is clear that humans's work and God's work go in the same direction and have the same aim: what people have to do is to complete creation and to make it perfect or, at least, not to ruin it owing to bad actions.

2. THE TURNING POINT OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Thanks to this background, Christian culture and the exploitation of natural resources could be considered independent or even in contradiction with one another. But really, especially nowadays, biblical tradition is accused of being responsible of ecological crisis: air and water pollution, contamination of the soil, extermination of wild animals, and so on. When and who exactly move this charge?

2.1. *Lynn White and his interpretation of the ecological crisis*

This accusation is due to Lynn Townsend White Jr. (1907-1987), who was a professor of medieval history at Princeton from 1933 to 1937, and at Stanford from 1937 to 1943. He was president of Mills College, Oakland, and a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. Moreover he helped to found The Society of History and Technology (SHOT) and he won the Pfizer Award for "Medieval Technology and Social Change" from the History of Science Society (HSS) and the Leonardo da Vinci medal and Dexter prize in 1964 and 1970. In 1967 White delivered a speech to

the American Association for the Advancement of Science that was published in *Science* in the same year under the title *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (White 1967). In this paper he points out that, from an historical point of view, all forms of life modify their context and that, quite unintentionally, changes in human ways often affect nonhuman nature. The word *ecology*, a neologism first appeared in the English language in 1873, testifies that “today, less than a century later, the impact of our race upon the environment has so increased in force that it has changed in essence” (1203). People have often been a dynamic element in their own environment, but in the present state of historical scholarship we usually do not know exactly when, where, or with what effects man-induced changes came. White wishes to fill this gap. He quotes the *Baconian creed* included in *Novum Organum* and he goes on reflecting on the relationship between science and technology:

As a beginning we should try to clarify our thinking by looking, in some historical depth, at the presuppositions that underlie modern technology and science. Science was traditionally aristocratic, speculative, intellectual in intent; technology was lower-class, empirical, action oriented. The quite sudden fusion of these two, towards the middle of the 19th century, is surely related to the slightly prior and contemporary democratic revolutions which, by reducing social barriers, tended to assert a functional unity of brain and hand. Our ecologic crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture. The issue is whether a democratized world can survive its own implications. Presumably we cannot unless we rethink our axioms. (1204)

This modern alliance of science with technology is distinctively Occidental and it is the reason of the leadership of the West. This fact is due to the so-called Scientific Revolution of the 17th century and to the so-called industrial revolution of the 18th century, but its roots are mere ancient. Modern science is supposed to have begun in 1543, when both Copernicus and Vesalius published their great works, but White argues that the distinctive Western tradition of science began in the late 11th century with a massive movement of translation of Arabic and Greek scientific works into Latin. He also underlines an anthropological change: formerly human had been part of nature, after the advent of modern science and of its marriage with technology, he became the exploiter of nature. According to this view human and nature are two things, and man is the uncontested master. At this point White introduces the relevant role of religion:

These novelties seem to be in harmony with larger intellectual patterns. What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion. [...] The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest physical revolution in the history of our culture. It

has become fashionable today to say that, for better or worse, we live in “the post-Christian age”. Certainly the forms of our thinking and language have largely ceased to be Christian, but to my eye the substance often remains amazingly akin to that of the past. Our daily habits of action, for example, are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient. It is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian teleology. (1205)

Even if we accept this historical analysis, the implicit negative evaluation of it deserves to be discussed. But a greater problem arises when White presents his position interpreting Genesis:

Christianity inherited from Judaism is not only a concept of time as non-repetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep male from being lonely. Human named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for human’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although human’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image. (1205)

And so the peremptory conclusion: “especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (1205). Quoting without references Tertullian (155-240) and Irenaeus of Lyons (early 2nd century - ca. 202) and contrasting Christianity with ancient paganism and Asia’s religions, White thinks of Christianity as a dualistic religion and a religion that insists it is God’s will that human exploits nature for his/her personal ends. If possible, White’s opinion is even more severe:

By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. [...] The spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man’s effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the only inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled. (1205)

But there is also another link between Christianity and contemporary ecologic problems. This link is deep-rooted in Western atmosphere, in fact Eastern theology, according to White, has been intellectualistic and contemplative, while the Western one has been voluntaristic and directed to action. In his world:

the Christian dogma of creation, which is found in the first clause of all the Creeds, has another meaning for our comprehension of today’s ecological crisis. By revelation, God has given man the Bible, the Book of Scriptures. But since God had made nature, nature also must reveal the divine mental-

ity. The religious study of nature for the better understanding of God was known as natural theology. In the early Church, and always in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men [...]. However, in the Latin West by the early 13th century natural theology was following a very different bent. It was ceasing to be the decoding of the physical symbols of God's communication with man and was becoming the effort to understand God's mind by discovering how his creation operates. (1206)

This mention of natural theology seems to be an implicit accusation of Catholicism. This is the final conclusion drawn by White:

modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntaristic realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology – hitherto quite separate activities – joined to give mankind power which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. (1206)

2.2. *The Puritan context*

To sum up, White's generalizations lead him to individuate the following accusations turned against Christianity: (1) Christians consider humans to be superior to all other beings and this legitimates that all creatures are at the service of mankind; (2) monotheism prevents the possibility of a personal relationship with natural elements; (3) the refusal of metempsychosis aids in depreciating the value of the animal world; (4) the biblical negative conception about deserts and wild places strengthens the tendency to evaluate non humanized landscapes as without any intrinsic value; (5) the appreciation of the transcendent world implies the indifference towards the material one; (6) the apocalypse implicit in the final judgement and the relative annihilation are not compatible with an ethic of environment. The doubtfulness of each of these affirmations suggests a question: what model of Christianity does White have in mind? Shea (1993) argues that the context in which he moves is the Puritan one and, in particular, Puritans who arrived in America in the 17th century². They followed a strong version of Calvinism where the role of original sin was very decisive and, consequently, they thought nature – at least after Adam's *fall* – be an unchanging

² It must be noted that English Puritans appreciated nature in a different way as Thomas Traherne's (1637-1674) prose and William Blake's (1757-1827) poetry show (Shea 1993, 208-9).

threat for mankind. Sagoff (1988, 125-9) reconstructs the religious rhetoric of Puritans who ran away from the paradise of England, where they were persecuted, to the desert and inhospitable lands of the New World. Their religious, political and military leaders, as John Higginson (1561-1622), John Winthrop (1587-1649), Samuel Danforth (1626-1674), Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), and Cotton Mather (1663-1728) described the relationship between Puritans and environment as a bloody battle. Winning this battle was necessary not only for the physical survival, but also to be sure that God's favour was for the Puritans. Another source for White's assertions is American romanticism that leads to a sort of deism and pantheism. Let's consider the following emblematic verses:

And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean, and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man; / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought / And rolls through all things. (Wordsworth 1904, 92, lines 93-102)

It is relevant to remember that in the 18th century America there was an integration between pantheism and democratic principles, as Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) already noted in his *De la démocratie en Amérique* (vol. II, chap. 7) and as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) theorized (Shea 1993, 204-7). Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), professor of forestry at the University of Wisconsin unconsciously echoes Rousseau and wrote:

Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. (Leopold 1993, 78)

The two sources mentioned above have determined White's conception about Christianity or, better, have informed his prejudices about it. He ignores other Christian traditions which go in a very different way, for example the Benedictine one, which, in the sixties, was known in America thanks to the studies of René Dubos (1973).

2.3. *Ecological philosophy and environmental ethics*

White's thought influence pervaded not only public opinion, but also influenced other authors, as Roderick F. Nash (1989, 92) and Milan Kundera (1999, 290) who corroborated his thesis. In the Seventies, new fields of

ethics about ecology (Beatty 1998) were born under his blessing. In this decade a small number of academic philosophers in the English-speaking world began to turn their attention to the questions concerning the natural environment. Environmental philosophy initially encompassed various types of enquiry, including applied ethics oriented to issues such as nuclear power and the deployment of toxic chemicals; more abstract extrapolations of traditional ethical theories, such as Kantianism, utilitarianism and consequentialism, into environmental contexts; and, also, a far more radical project involving the reappraisal of basic presuppositions of Western thought in the light of their implications for our relation to the natural world. But what do ecological philosophers exactly understand referring to *Western thought*? For them the dominant worldview is sometimes called *Newtonian*, sometimes *Cartesian*. It was forged during the scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries, though it is often seen – without justification – as having antecedents in both classical Greek thought and Christianity. It is Newtonian insofar as it is atomistic and mechanistic, and it is Cartesian insofar as it is dualistic. Freya Mathews summarizes ecological philosophers' position about the Western thought as follows:

For if humanity was the repository of all meaning and purpose, then it was also the exclusive locus of value; matter as the inert and dead, the purposeless and blind, possessed only the meaning and hence value that we projected onto it. This flattering image of humanity as categorically elevated above the rest of nature had an obvious appeal in an expansive and ambitious age. Moreover, the natural world, divested of intrinsic value, was rendered a fit object for human use, significant only as a reservoir of resources for humankind. This dissolution of traditional constraints on the exploitation of the natural environment obviously suited the mercantile ends of the early modern era. In reinforcing the assumption that humanity is the only proper object of moral concern and the only yardstick of meaning and value in life, the scientific worldview is seen by eco-philosophers as entrenching the human centredness or *anthropocentrism* that was to a certain extent already, in the pre-modern period, characteristic of Western thought, with its Judeo-Christian and classical Greek and Roman origins. Ultimately, the classical scientific worldview and the anthropocentrism which accompanies it may be seen to rest on a fundamental principle of division or separation. (Mathews 1998, 198)

If the dominant worldview emphasizes separation, alternative, ecological worldviews rest on a principle of interconnectedness. This holistic interpretation of reality was understood in different ways by different authors. It is relevant, for our purpose, to note that eco-philosophers consider spirit as immanent in matter, body, Nature in order to remove the traditional justifications for anthropocentric attitudes. The question is that they prefer to

propose a new religious attitude, rather than inquiring if Christianity and biblical thought are really so compromised with modern anthropocentrism.

The main outcome of ecological philosophy is the so called *environmental ethics* (Brennan 1998). Its guru, Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher, argues that human self-realization depends on identification with nature (Naess 1987). Deep ecology started as a doctrine of biospheric egalitarianism, i.e. all living things have the same claim to live and flourish (Devall and Session 1985). It evolved into a platform meant to embrace all those who recognize the inherent value of natural things and who share a concern to preserve natural diversity whatever their differences in underlying philosophies. A key point of deep ecology is that all living things are members of larger biotic or ecological communities. The larger community may then be regarded as a place of value, with individuals needs and projects assessed in terms of their contribution to the good of the larger whole. Other radical positions are already aligned with well-known political standpoints. *Social ecology* is a type of Green anarchism, while *ecofeminism* regards the destruction of nature as intimately linked to the oppressive structures of patriarchy. From the political point of view Ernest Haeckel (1834-1919) who coined the term *ecology*, was associated with the extreme right, the Hitler youth were taught to value nature and the SS training manual declared the forests of Germany to be of special value (Pois 1986). Although followers of the deep ecology platform are typically vague about the political solutions they put forward, the position has, on occasion, been accused of supporting *eco-fascism*. The fear behind this accusation is that biocentrism or eco-centrism may motivate the state to be unacceptably coercive towards individuals for the sake of some larger environmental good.

As a result of this plurality of positions, there is no generally agreed radical platform (Bondi 2015). The only two elements they have in common are (1) the rejection or, in the best case, the indifference towards institutional religions; and (2) a marked anti-anthropocentrism (Watson 1983), with the only exception of Hans Jonas' work (1985). At length this lack of foundation led to a philosophical crisis of these currents of thought which have started to be activist movements. Naess' own *ecosophy* is an amalgam of various influences, including Spinoza, Gandhi, logical positivism and the nature-centredness of the Norwegian folk tradition. Other authors, rather than studying in depth pre-modern Western philosophy, prefer to appeal for justification to certain minority traditions, such as pantheism, Romanticism, monism or the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Eastern traditions, such as Daoism and Buddhism, and the spiritual traditions of indigenous people, are also invoked. But it seems that these

interests do not concern also Christianity, a religion that they choose to attack, rather than value serenely paying attention, at least, to contemporary biblical scholars.

3. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

White has ended his paper wishing that Christian religion should drop its dogmas and start to follow the example of Francis of Assisi, a Saint who “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (White 1967, 1206). White underlined that “he was so clearly heretical that a General of the Franciscan Order, Saint Bonaventura, a great and perceptive Christian, tried to suppress the early accounts of Franciscanism” (1206). This author adds:

Both our present science and our present technology are so tintured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists. (1207)

So, it is considered a sort of irony of history that the Holy See proclaimed Francis the patron saint of ecologists in 1980 and that the present pontiff, who chose call himself *Francis* for the first time in the history of the Church, has recently written an encyclical on ecological problems starting from Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*. Before taking this text into consideration, let’s consider a different way to appreciate the relationship between Christian religion, the modern world and ecological questions.

3.1. *Romano Guardini and the notion of power*

Even if we can agree with White and so consider the notion of power the main notion that determines the relationship between mankind and nature, the question of why nowadays this notion is problematic remains. In the previous section I have shown White’s analysis to be problematic, and I will now present Romano Guardini’s (1885-1968) thesis according to which the notion of power became pernicious because it was redefined through secularization and because we use it without any responsibility. Our condition is

the consequence of the fact that we do not recognize the limit of our power. We think we can arrogate ourselves God's prerogative. The Genesis warns people people that they did not create anything from nothing and that their task was to harmonize themselves with the natural order of creation. When human beings forgot these things they were removed from paradise. Power in itself is neutral; it is a kind of mere *datum*: every human act, each situation, the simple fact of being, are directly or indirectly connected with a feeling of power. The discrimination is between the use of power and the pleasure of power. In its positive declination, power produces in us the awareness to be masters of ourselves and to have a force; in its negative form it changes into arrogance and vanity. The consciousness of power is an ontological feature for human beings, neutral from a moral point of view. The questions and the problems start with its exercise and its use and so they have a metaphysical component and a religious one. For this reason, Guardini suggests to take Genesis into consideration (1961, chap. II). First of all he underlines that, following the biblical narration, each person is gifted with a different nature in comparison with other living beings. He/she is created as the other beings, but moreover he/she has in him/herself the image of God. This means that human beings are part of created nature, but, at the same time, that they have a privileged relationship with God thanks to which they could adopt a definite position regarding nature and must do it. Moreover Guardini notes that human being is called to become master not only of nature, but, first of all, of himself. The resemblance between God and mankind consists in this exercise of a domain, which is a gift. And just because it is a gift, it is a task. Domain does not have the purpose of usefulness, profit, progress, affluence, wellbeing and so on, but it is ordered to increase the resemblance between God and humans. After original sin, the problem is that human claims to use this power without corresponding ethics. He/she wants to do what he/she is able to do, without asking him/herself if he/she is doing a right thing or a wrong one. In God's project, the greatness of mankind is based on reliability and on responsibility. In this perspective, power is obedience and service. The model proposed by Christian revelation is Jesus Christ, presented in the New Testament as the new Adam. Dominion is obedience because it must comply with the truth of created beings. Dominion is service because it must be exercised inside God's creation: it has the aim to keep on in history and in culture what God in His absolute freedom has created as nature. Human power must not build a self-governing or an auto-referential world, but, according to God's will, it has to realize God's world in order to render it a world of human freedom.

Consistently, Guardini avoids both naturalistic optimism and contemporary pessimism and he looks to the New Testament revelation and he

trusts in the gift of Redemption, seen as a second creation. Also in this case people have the responsibility to accept or refuse it. Redemption causes, if people do not obstacle it, the transformation of power into humility. The real power is attending to other beings, which means taking care of people and managing non-auto-consciousness beings. The power which possesses itself in a full way is a power able to forgo itself, and it is not a power that becomes violence, overwhelming, and destructive.

3.2. *Suggestions from Francis' "Laudato si"*

Guardini's historiographical and theoretical interpretation is one of the background of the last social encyclical letter promulgate by the Holy Father Francis (Damonte 2016). This ecclesial document (Francis 2015) is addressed to all people and it is particularly clear, frank. In order to appreciate what it says about Genesis 1:28 and 2:15, I simply propose the following anthology³. We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gn* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters (2).

Without repeating the entire theology of creation, we can ask what the great biblical narratives say about the relationship of human beings with the world. In the first creation account in the book of Genesis, God's plan includes creating humanity. After the creation of man and woman, "God saw everything that he had made, and beheld it was *very good*" (*Gn* 1:31). The Bible teaches that every man and woman is created out of love and made in God's image and likeness (cf. *Gn* 1:26). This shows us the immense dignity of each person, "who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons" (65).

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. *Gn* 1:28), to "till it

³ In this case numbers indicate paragraphs and not pages.

and keep it” (*Gn* 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflicting (cf. *Gn* 3:17-19). It is significant that the harmony which Saint Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of that rupture. Saint Bonaventure held that, through universal reconciliation with every creature, Saint Francis in some way returned to the state of original innocence. This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature (66).

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. *Gn* 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gn* 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations (67).

This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibriums existing between the creatures of this world, for “he commanded and they were created; and he established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds and he set a law which cannot pass away” (*Sal* 148:5b-6). The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings (68).

Francis refers himself to the story of Cain and Abel in order to show what happens when right relationships among people and between mankind, God and nature are disregarded: “the voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground” (*Gn* 4:9-11). Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the

earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered (70).

Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour, as Saint John Paul II wisely noted in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. According to the biblical account of creation, God placed man and woman in the garden he had created (cf. *Gn* 2:15) not only to preserve it (“keep”) but also to make it fruitful (“till”). Labourers and craftsmen thus “maintain the fabric of the world” (*Sir* 38:34). Developing the created world in a prudent way is the best way of caring for it, as this means that we ourselves become the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things (124).

4. CONCLUSIONS AS ENGAGEMENTS

The role of religions in our societies increases. The fact that contemporary societies are part of the so called *global village* and that their specific cultures are *globals* makes the religious values decisive and so their performative role cannot be neglected (Mendieta and Van Antwerpen 2001). This is true also in the case of current ecologic crisis (Gottlieb 2004). The Christian message held in Genesis, correctly understood, implies that human power over nature is not arbitrary, nor absolute, but it must correspond with the order of the creation. This book is sacred and revealed for believers and so it is normative for them: all Christians have to collaborate to God’s project increasing it, and not thwarting it. I think this perspective is greater and greater: it could be shared with other monotheistic religions, in fact both Judaism and Islam consider God as creator of all that exists. Moreover this approach could be useful also among unbelievers insofar as it appeals to human responsibility and insofar as it warns we do not possess nature, but we have received it from past generations and we have to preserve it for future generations (Damonte 2013) and for the necessities of poor people. Also in the case of ecology, the spiritual force of a religious message could improve our actions (Damonte 2009). The relationship between humanity and the environment is a dynamic and active process that must be improved and not cut off. Neglected nature is not friendly. The human task towards nature has to have the qualities of a good administration, not of a dictator, nor of a cold person. I hope to have removed some pernicious prejudices and to have suggested some available perspectives which do not belong to a new form of anthropocentrism, but fully depend on human responsibility.

5. APPENDIX

Considering the relevance I have ascribed to two verses of Genesis, I think reasonable to quote this verses in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and in the main English translation. I do this in the present appendix, making reference to *BibleWorks*, the most famous and complete informatic multimedial support used by Bible scholars ⁴.

5.1. Genesis 1:28

ויברך אותם אלהים ויאמר להם אלהים פרו ורבו
Westminster Hebrew Old Testament

וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בְדגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַי הָרֶמֶשׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

LXX Septuaginta Rahlfs' – και ηὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς λέγων αὐξάνετε και πληθύνετε και πληρώσατε τὴν γῆν και κατακυριεύσατε αὐτῆς και ἄρχετε τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς θαλάσσης και τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ και πάντων τῶν κτηνῶν και πάσης τῆς γῆς και πάντων τῶν ἔρπετῶν τῶν ἔρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

Latin Vulgate – *Benedixitque illis Deus et ait crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam et dominamini piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et universis animantibus quae moventur super terram.*

King James (1611/1769) – *And God blessed them, and God said unto them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth".*

The Webster Bible (1833) – *And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living animal that moveth upon the earth".*

Young's Literal Translation (1862/1889) – *And God blesseth them, and God saith to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over fish of the sea, and over fowl of the heavens, and over every living thing that is creeping upon the earth".*

The Darby Bible (1884/1890) – *And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the heavens, and over every animal that moveth on the earth".*

⁴ *BibleWorks for Windows*, version 3.5 (1996), edited by Michael S. Bushell.

American Standard Version (1901) – *And God blessed them: and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”.*

The Bible in Basic English (1949/1964) – *And God gave them his blessing and said to them, “Be fertile and have increase, and make the earth full and be masters of it; be rulers over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing moving on the earth”.*

Revised Standard Version (1952) – *And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.*

New King James Version (1982) – *Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth”.*

New Revised Standard Version (1989) – *God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.*

5.2. Genesis 2:15

ויקח יהוה אלהים את־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ: Westminster Hebrew Old Testament

LXX Septuaginta Rahlfs’ – *καὶ ἔλαβεν κύριος ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὃν ἔπλασεν καὶ ἔθετο αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ ἐργάζεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ φυλάσσειν.*

Latin Vulgate – *Tulit ergo Dominus Deus hominem et posuit eum in paradiso voluptatis ut operaretur et custodiret illum.*

King James (1611/1769) – *And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.*

The Webster Bible (1833) – *And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it.*

Young’s Literal Translation (1862/1889) – *And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to serve it, and to keep it.*

The Darby Bible (1884/1890) – *And Jehovah Elohim took Man, and put him into the garden of Eden, to till it and to guard it.*

American Standard Version (1901) – *And Jehovah God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.*

The Bible in Basic English (1949/1964) – *And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to do work in it and take care of it.*

Revised Standard Version (1952) – *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

New King James Version (1982) – *Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.*

New Revised Standard Version (1989) – *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

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