



Journal of Religion & Society Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 9 (2013)

The Greening of the Papacy

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and John J. O'Keefe

Pope Benedict's Anthropocentrism

Is it a Deal Breaker?

John J. O'Keefe, Creighton University

Introduction

Seven years ago the University of St. Thomas and the United States Catholic Conference sponsored a conference on Catholic Theology and the environment. That event was the brain child of Walter Grazer, who, along with Drew Christiansen (currently editor of *America* magazine) published a collection of essays called *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*. This book, which appeared in 1996, was one of the first efforts by Roman Catholic theologians to seriously engage the theological implications of the environmental crisis. Concerned about the continuing silence of Roman Catholic voices in theological conversations about the environment, Grazer thought it would be a good idea to find Catholic scholars who had an interest in environmental issues and gather them together in one place so that they could talk to each other and share ideas. Grazer hoped that this would, in turn, help to encourage more active Catholic participation in emerging eco-theology.

I was one of the scholars who attended that meeting, and it did have the effect of reorienting my scholarly research in a more environmental direction. I remember one moment in particular when John Coleman, S.J., a social ethicist, swept into one of the sessions and proceeded to lambaste the Christian religion for its relentless anthropocentrism. At the time, I did not know the degree to which anthropocentrism was a concern of environmentally minded theologians and his vehemence came as something of a surprise. However, I now know that when Coleman diagnosed anthropocentrism as, perhaps, the core pathology infecting Christian thinking about the relationship between humans and the rest of the biotic community, he was not so much advancing a new thesis as he was reaffirming a shared consensus that had already emerged among eco-theologians and that Catholic thinkers, although latecomers to the conversation, would inevitably be obliged to affirm.

Contemporary Christian environmental theological reflection generally begins with a ritual rehearsal of the arguments of Lynn White, Jr. and his massively influential essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," published in 1967. White's essay could arguably be described as a call for a Franciscan revival against the co-opting forces that have dragged Christianity into a world denying, technology-abusing, and humanity-obsessing religious distortion. However, most authors who cite White do not pay much attention to the call for a new Franciscan expression. Instead, they focus upon his scathing critique of Christianity's environmental legacy. For example, in a key passage White asserts, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen." He goes on to insist, without argument, that, unlike ancient pagan religions and Asian religions, Christianity embraced "a dualism of man and nature" and "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (1205). The culprits according to White were the early Christian theologians Tertullian and Irenaeus of Lyons.

In his essay White hints at, but does not consider carefully, the considerable environmental ambiguity introduced into Christian culture by certain interpretations of the creation narratives of Genesis, in particular, Genesis 1:26-28. In this passage humans are said to have been created in the image and likeness of God and to have been given dominion over the "the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." In the literature of environmental theology these texts have received enormous attention. For some, they prove that the Christian religion is irredeemably anthropocentric and must be abandoned or significantly revised (see, for example, Ruether). Most readers are less extreme, but even the defenders of the tradition realize that they must find some way to soften, revise, or significantly reinterpret these passages so that they do not suggest that God sanctions abusive human attitudes toward nature (Bouma-Prediger).

The Problem of Anthropocentrism

As a student of the early church, I find it extremely odd that White targets Irenaeus of Lyons as one of the ancient Christian villains most responsible for the development of calamitous anthropocentrism. Among all of the fathers of the church, Irenaeus was perhaps the least dualistic and most affirming of the inherent goodness of the material creation, but that is another story. I am also aware of the long history of interpretation of Genesis 1. So, I reject the facile and frequently bigoted ways in which some commentators use it as a text to

affirm their pre-determined anti-Christian biases. However, while White might be wrong about the role of Irenaeus and simplistic in how he understands the history of the interpretation of Genesis, his observation that a great deal of ancient Christianity was prone to anti-worldly dualism is not wrong (see, for example, Santmire). Likewise, his recognition that this theological position is a possible ancient cause of our modern estrangement from nature struck, and continues, to strike a chord with students of environmental theology. White's big thesis – that Christian dualism is the cause of our environmental crisis – possesses real explanatory power. Even when his mistakes and overstatements are removed, something about this thesis seems right. Christianity did and does have a mixed legacy when it comes to valuing the material creation.

This helps to explain why in the world of eco-theology there is so much consensus among ecologically-minded theologians that Christian anthropocentrism is a significant problem. The agreement is wide and includes voices representing very different theological perspectives. Deep ecologists like Bron Taylor tend to see anthropocentrism as the beginning of human alienation from nature. They long for the restoration of a primordial ecological eden of the sort depicted in James Cameron's film *Avatar*, about which Taylor has written popularly. Deep suspicion of anthropocentrism runs through the entire of work of the revisionist theologian and Catholic priest Thomas Berry (d. 2009). In one of his essays Berry wrote, "if there were a parliament of creatures, its first decision might well be to vote the humans out of the community, too deadly a presence to tolerate any further. We are the affliction of the world, its demonic presence. We are the violation of earth's most sacred aspects" (209).

Yet worries about anthropocentrism are not limited to ideologies tinged with misanthropy such as we find in Thomas Berry and the deep ecologist. They also appear in much more conservative thinkers. Wendell Berry, who differs in almost every way from the aforementioned Thomas Berry, longs throughout his writings for a renewal of the relationship between humans and the land. "We have tried on a large scale," he writes, "the experiment of preferring ourselves to the exclusion of all other creatures, with results that are manifestly disastrous." Although he is suspicious of the anti-human rhetoric that often accompanies ecological laments about the legacy of Christian anthropocentrism, Berry recognizes the problem as severe. "Misanthropy is not the remedy for 'anthropocentrism,'" he explains. "We must see that we cannot be made kind toward our fellow creatures except by the same qualities that make us kind toward our fellow humans" (78).

Even the evangelical (and quite traditional) eco-theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger recognizes that simply repeating the traditional Christian anthropocentric formulae is not a sufficient response to the challenges posed by the genuine ecological needs of the world. Representing an emerging new position, Bouma-Prediger argues that for Christians the eco-centrism of deep ecologists like Thomas Berry is not, in the end, the best answer to the problem of abusive Christian anthropocentrism. "Neither anthropocentric (human-centered) nor biocentric (life centered) nor ecocentric (earth-centered) alternatives can do justice to the testimony of Scripture," he explains. "God is the measure of all things, not humans." What we need, Bouma-Prediger argues is theocentrism, a position that asserts that "all things exist to praise God" (112).

Benedict and Anthropocentrism

From these examples it should be clear that theologians working on environmental issues take it for granted that anthropocentrism is a problem, even if they do not always agree about how to solve it. However, when one considers the writing of Pope Benedict XVI on the environment, especially his World Day of Peace message for 2010 and chapter 4 of *Caritas in Veritate*, explicit engagement with the problem of anthropocentrism is conspicuously absent. The Pope's statements reaffirm an anthropocentric theology without any significant discussion of the potential flaws of such a theology.

Consider the following quotations taken from *Caritas in Veritate* (48). After writing eloquently about our responsibility to care for nature as “the setting for our life,” the Pope becomes cautious. “It should also be stressed,” he warns, “that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person.” Such a view, he thinks, “leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism – human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense.” To be fair, the Pope is not suggesting that nature does not matter. Indeed, he goes on to say that we should also reject interpretations of the human relationship with creation that assert a “total technical dominion over nature.” Indeed he adds, “the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure.” However, the assertion that the human person is more important than nature, suggests to readers familiar with the conversations happening among eco-theologians that the Pope has not fully internalized the real problems posed by anthropocentric language.

In his World Day of Peace message for 2010, Pope Benedict asserts his worries about the rejection of anthropocentrism more bluntly:

A correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment will not end by absolutizing nature or by considering it more important than the human person. If the Church's Magisterium expresses grave misgivings about notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism, it is because such notions eliminate the difference of identity and worth between the human person and other living things. In the name of a supposedly egalitarian vision of the “dignity” of all living creatures, such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings. They also open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism, which would see the source of man's salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms (2009b: 13).

Again, as in *Caritas in Veritate*, the World Day of Peace message sounds notes of deep reverence for the creation and his defense of anthropomorphism does not negate this. However, when the Pope implies that any revision to the traditional language of human dominion and hegemony over nature is “neo-pagan” or “pantheistic” he runs the risk of distorting or even dismissing the ongoing efforts within the theological community to consider carefully the real problems associated with an overly anthropocentric worldview and to respond faithfully and creatively. It is simply not the case that all people who worry about historical anthropocentrism are necessarily neo-pagans or pantheists.

The Pope's tenacious clinging to historical anthropocentric language, even as he sounds increasingly urgent ecological warnings, will surprise no one who has been paying attention to the incremental greening of magisterial teaching. Even though it is clear that since the 1990s this teaching has become increasingly aware of the need for the Church to engage ecological issues, the Pope and the bishops have consistently remained staunch defenders of traditional anthropocentric language. Human beings have dominion, for good or for ill, to use the earth either as careful stewards or as reckless dominators. This power is, they think, a part of our core dignity.

One could argue that a great deal of the current magisterial teaching on ecology actually has its roots in Pope John Paul's II encyclical letter *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*. While this letter is not in any way focused on the environment, it does contain one important and influential section. In it the Pope warns that "we cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate – animals, plants, the natural elements – simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs." He notes that "natural resources are limited" and that environmental degradation has a negative impact on health. Finally, he concludes the section in this way:

The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to "use and misuse," or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree" (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity (34).

With this section of the encyclical Pope John Paul II created an opening for an expansion of magisterial teaching about the environment, but his language is cautious. The phrase "categories of beings" sound vaguely Thomistic, and the admonition that humans not abuse the dominion they have been given does nothing to challenge the anthropocentric category of dominion itself.

In many ways subsequent magisterial teachings on the environment – from the local statements of bishop's conferences to Pope Benedict – have built upon John Paul II's green turn, but without, it seems, serious engagement with the theological discussion. Thus Pope Benedict's fears of a neo-pagan revival or an explosion of pantheism show that at least some within the Magisterium have been exposed to elements of the theological perspective represented by authors like Thomas Berry, but there does not appear to be much awareness of the more moderate and conservative theological voices mentioned above.

Now, on the one hand, it seems to me that this commitment to traditional anthropocentric language is not necessarily a deal-breaker. It does not and should not disqualify the efforts of the Pope and the bishops to make their teaching more ecological and to call Catholics to deeper environmental engagement. It is certainly an unqualified good when the Pope and others urge us to care for the world and to be aware of the calamitous impact of environmental degradation. Indeed, Pope Benedict says some thoughtful things in both *Caritas in Veritate* and the 2010 World Day of Peace message.

The Pope, for example, is not a climate change denier. He asserts this as a reality that is given and calls the human community to a change of heart (2009b: 4). He affirms that creation is not a temporary waypoint on our journey to heaven; it is, rather, the very “setting for our life” (2009b: 48). He calls for a renewal of culture and a rejection of materialistic overconsumption. He sees this as key to the renewal of the earth (2009b: 9 and 11). In *Caritas in Veritate*, by including a long excursus on the environment, he recognizes the connection between environmental degradation and global poverty, and he explicitly connects environmental action with Catholic Social Teaching. He teaches a doctrine of inter-generational justice and reminds readers that the moral imperative to treat the earth with care means that we are responsible to generations not yet born (2009a: 48). He observes that the way we treat the earth influences how we treat each other and sees a link between the degradation of humans and the degradation of the earth (2009a: 51). Finally, Pope Benedict warns of a coming rebellion of creation in the face of poor human stewardship (2009b: 6).

All of these are positive positions and represent substantial and meaningful development of official magisterial teaching about the environment that is not negated because they are made within a context of theological caution. Moreover, it strikes me that at a pastoral level it does not matter if the Pope says nothing about anthropocentrism and affirms traditional ideas about human hegemony over nature. The Pope and the bishops can urge a change in behavior that does not depend on the conclusions of theologians about the actual dominion or non-dominion of humans. Sometimes theology does not really matter.

For example, every semester I teach students about the Nicene Creed. Many of these students have been saying the Creed their entire lives and have never thought about the meaning of the phrase “one in being” or “consubstantial with the Father” and they are not by that lack of thinking somehow diminished in their Christianity. We can go from birth to old age living lives of deep Christian commitment, caring for the world and for the poor and serving God with open hearts, all the while reciting the Creed every week and never knowing that we are professing a particular doctrine of God that is anti-Arian and deeply enmeshed in the philosophical language of the ancient world. Holiness depends in no way on mastering or even knowing about that ancient conversation.

Yet, even while this is true, it is also true that grasping the meaning of “consubstantial” in its historical context does matter. The idea that the Son is less than the Father, as a kind of second God, is not compatible with Christian monotheism. The ancient participants in the theological controversies of the fourth century understood what was at stake and labored, sometimes at great personal cost, to create a Christian doctrine of God that both honored the biblical witness and respected what they understood about the world they inhabited. This ancient partnership between Christian theology and the language of Platonism is parallel with contemporary efforts to engage modern science and to reject having to make a false choice between one or the other. The Nicene Creed, and the debate it enshrines, represents the Christian intellectual tradition at its best.

The Catholic tradition of engagement with difficult questions is ancient and the solutions that have come from this engagement do eventually matter for the average person living the Christian life. If the opponents of Nicaea had won the day, the aforementioned

pious Christians would have gone from birth to old age worshiping the Son God and the greater Father God and maybe the lesser Holy Spirit God. Ideas matter.

So, it may be true that on one level the debate about anthropocentrism currently underway among eco-theologians may have little immediate consequence for the average person in the pew. Such persons might recycle, they might diligently turn off their phantom power, and they might even protest the Keystone Pipeline and still think that humans are the pinnacle of creation, and that they have dominion over nature and need to be good stewards. An anthropocentric worldview does not necessarily hinder right action on critical issues. However, while this may be so, failure to engage the problem of anthropocentrism goes against the best practices of Catholic theology. Catholic theology has historically tried to adjust to reality as it encounters it. This was true of the encounter with ancient Platonism, the encounter with Aristotle, and, much more recently, with the encounter with evolutionary science. No Catholic intellectual thinks that the Christian doctrine of creation is incompatible with evolution. No Catholic intellectual clings to a literal reading of the seven days of creation.

Now, there are all kinds of reasons to believe that an anthropocentric worldview is false. That is, the reality we are encountering contradicts the traditional position. Given what we know about the size of the universe, its expansive character, and given the possibility that there may in fact be a multiverse (see Green), the idea that creation exists entirely for humans is highly implausible, even silly. If the cosmos – the sum total of reality – is infinite, or an infinity of finitudes, as it seems to many scientific observers, then traditional anthropocentric readings of Genesis are even more removed from what we know from other areas of human inquiry. Even if we limit the cosmic scope of the claim and say that the earth, but not the rest of the universe, was created for humans, the implausibility asserts itself. Were the dinosaurs really created for us? What about those strange worms that live around volcanic shoots at the bottom of the ocean? Were they also created from humans?

In the face of all this evidence, why do the Pope and many others cling so tenaciously to a literalist reading of the anthropocentric elements of Genesis 1, especially verse 26? Why are they literalists here when they are not literalists in their interpretations of the rest of the creation narrative? Catholic theologians, including the Pope, do not argue, for example, that the world was literally made in seven days or that Adam and Eve were literal creatures. Instead, they would cede the literal accounting of those things to evolutionary science. But this is not the case with Genesis 1:26. For the Pope and others, it must mean literally that humans have dominion and they are unwilling to consider any exegetical strategies that would help them escape for such a literal reading. Why is that?

Rethinking Anthropocentrism

I conclude by suggesting a possible explanation. When Catholic theology adjusted to the knowledge that life on earth evolved over millions of years it did so by drawing upon its ancient comfort with non-literal reading of the Bible. The idea that the text of scripture contains layers of meaning below the surface literal meaning goes back to the beginning of the tradition. Thus, the accommodation of evolution requires simply that the creation story of Genesis be interpreted in a non-literal way. One can accept evolutionary science as a description of how the world happened and then say that Genesis tells why the world

happened and that God is responsible for it. The creation narrative refers to the character of our relationship with God rather than to the scientific details of the world beginnings.

From this perspective the literal details of the creation account stand for other things. The narrative is understood metaphorically and figuratively. For example, the seven days are symbolic of something like the fullness of time, and the exile of Adam and Eve from Eden are mythic accounts of how humans came to be estranged from God. This interpretation may seem odd to scientists who are not religious and heretical to Christian fundamentalists, but it is easy for Catholics because it actually has no impact on the doctrine of creation itself. One can accept evolution, reinterpret Genesis to cope, and then go happily along believing everything else as before, including the idea that God assigned dominion to humans, albeit as part of the evolutionary process.

However, a rereading of Genesis that dethrones humans from their place in the center of creation opens the door to the possibility that the rest of the creation has a value independent of its service to humans. Such a revision has a very different impact than accepting evolution. Although such a revision is relatively easy exegetically, it is not easy doctrinally. The easiest revision strategy would be to point out, as Ronald Simkins does in his essay in this volume, that Genesis 1:26 and its assertion of dominion is actually refuted by the rest of the biblical tradition, in which humans have no such thing. One could even argue that the priestly author of Genesis 1 uses the older Yahwist account found in Genesis 2 and 3 to point tragically to the reality that while dominion may have been given to humans when they were created, because of their disobedience, it is now gone forever.

Thus, while there are a number of interpretive strategies that would easily disabuse humans of their dreams of dominion, such interpretations actually require significant rethinking of the doctrine of creation, at least of that doctrine as it has been developed over the last two thousand years. To claim that the creation is not, after all, just for humans, invites revisions of other major doctrines, including the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the fundamentals of soteriology, all of which, at some level, presuppose a human-centered creation. For example, classical doctrine would say that Christ did not die to save the family pet, or the ancient Neanderthals, or the unknown beings who reside on Rigel 12. Do we really want to say that in the entire history of the universe, only one being was worthy of God's particular attention? We might respond by saying that Christ is relevant only to humans, and leave the rest to God. But, this would suggest at a minimum a revision of some of the more cosmic claims that have been made about Christ over the years.

I suggest that the impact of a non-anthropocentric reading of Genesis 1:26 has a cascading impact on the theological system in a way that the accommodation of evolution does not. Perhaps this helps explain why so many Catholic thinkers intuitively resist it. Revision at this level would challenge any theologian. It certainly challenges me. So, is the Pope's anthropocentrism a deal-breaker? Probably not. In spite of his literal commitment to human hegemony he raises critical issues, and he calls people to action. I am grateful for that. That said, the Pope's lack of interest in the problems caused by historical anthropocentrism does not mean that the problems are not there and that theologians should not try to solve them. We should.

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