

PhD DISSERTATION THESES

Christian Anthropocentrism in Environmental Ethics

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1. The Background of the Theses Examined in the Dissertation

Environmental philosophy emerged in the 1970's to reveal the spiritual and ideological foundations of the arrogant human behavior inducing the environmental crisis. The movement was relatively quick to arrive at the conclusion that traditional Western thought, particularly anthropocentrism, can be identified as the philosophical background that determined the behavior leading to the death of Nature, that is, "the ideological culprit". Literally, the term anthropocentrism refers to human-centered thinking and is based on the principle that Man is the only being that has moral value or *intrinsic value*, all other entities having only instrumental value, that is, it defines other entities as merely things.

Philosophers agree that the human being of moral status has intrinsic value. While environmental ethics also accepts this thesis, it also argues that Man is not the only being in possession of such value, other natural entities (animals, species, ecosystems) possess intrinsic value as well, thus secular environmental ethics is quick to occupy a non-anthropocentric or weakly anthropocentric position.

Some critics of traditional anthropocentrism wish to eliminate anthropocentrism from human thinking altogether (e.g. Lynn White, Jr.), while others consider anthropocentrism to be necessary, but in a renewed version and not in the traditional sense. The latter call their views anthropocentrism in a weak sense or relative anthropocentrism (e.g. Jan Deckers). Both non-anthropocentric authors and those wishing to renew anthropocentrism generally agree that the traditional Western anthropocentrism is anthropocentrism in the strong sense. This system of ideas goes back to three roots: classical Greek philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Modernism that started with Descartes.

(i) The anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy is the most concisely summarized by Aristotle in his *Politics* (1256 b): "*If therefore nature makes nothing without purpose or in vain, it follows that nature has made all the animals for the sake of men.*"

(ii) The emblematic Biblical quote on Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism comes in the 28th verse of the first Chapter in the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:28), in which God commands the first couple: "*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.*"

(iii) The ontological basis for Cartesian anthropocentrism is Descartes' assumption that in the created world there are two kinds of substances. One is *res cogitans*:

consciousness unfolding through doubt, whose main attribute is the ability to think, to have free will, that is, the ability to have self-determination. This is the essence of the ego that the philosopher identifies with the immortal, eternal soul. The other substance is *res extensa*, the extended body the attributes of which are nothing like the attributes of the conscious substance and that is just helplessly obeying the laws of mechanics. The *res cogitans*, possessing value in its own, exists only in Man, everything exterior to the human being is only *res extensa*.

2. The Research Method and General Conclusions

In mainstream secular environment philosophy, these three intellectual sources share the attribution of exclusive importance to Man, thus leaving no moral space for the adequate consideration of non-human entities. In this view, Western anthropocentrism is a homogenous ideology that assigns intrinsic value exclusively to man and considers everything else to have only instrumental value, thus leading to the arrogance that today's Western consumer society towards the environment.

As the conclusion of my research, I prove that these anthropocentric systems of thought show significant differences.

(i) While analyzing the anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy, there is no way to avoid the term *kalokagathia*. The anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy is incompatible with the consumerism prevailing today and the related anthropocentrism.

(ii) While the theoreticians of environment ethics who are critical of the anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian tradition refer to the Book of Genesis 1:28, they ignore the fact the original Hebrew word used in the Bible is *וַיְבָרֵךְ* (pronounced "uredu") means not only "to rule over", but also "to cultivate with care". Man has been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), who must assimilate God wanting the beauty and harmony of the created world. The duty to be *imago Dei*, as formulated in the Old Testament, is expanded in the New Testament with the duty of *sequela Christi*, that is, to walk in Christ's footsteps, to follow Jesus Christ.

(iii) Anthropocentrism originating in Cartesian thought harmonizes with Descartes' ideal of science and self-realization that exclude theology. Man can only be defined scientifically. On this basis, the human being – *homo sapiens sapiens* – is but one biological species out of the multitude of biological species. In this approach, anthropocentrism is a false concept because humanity is not biologically superior to any other species. Therefore, in the criticism formulated against anthropocentrism by mainstream of secular environment

philosophy, the *anthropocentrism* that attributes superiority to Man at the expense of the ecologic balance is *wrong*.

(iv) In my analysis, I prove that the three types of anthropocentrism are actually only two. Even though there are substantial differences between classical Greek and Judeo-Christian worldviews, from the perspective of environment ethics I put them both into the same group and I separate Cartesian anthropocentrism from the previous two concepts. To justify the classification, I argue that Cartesian anthropocentrism can be criticized based on arguments proposed by environmental ethics, but the critique is not applicable in the case of the other two concepts. I provide a detailed account of this incommensurability pertaining to Christian anthropocentrism and I demonstrate that the environment ethicists who criticize anthropocentrism and whose work I analyze in my dissertation essentially *misinterpret* Christian anthropocentrism.

Simultaneously, I attempt to uncover the possible causes for this misinterpretation and I conclude that the criticism formulated by these secular authors does have practical significance. Their works reveal the practical errors or the risk of errors that become possible with such a distorted interpretation of Christianity. They accuse anthropocentrism to be responsible for ecologic unsustainability, which may motivate those who take an interest in Christianity to cleanse their understanding regarding religious doctrines, this way enabling them to separate ecologically harmful misinterpretations from the message of universal love that is the essence of Christianity and that can serve as a possible and efficient ethical foundation for ecologic sustainability.

3. Concrete Results

(i) Lynn White Jr., an adept of bioegalitarianism and Jan Deckers, an adept of weak anthropocentrism reduces Christianity to strong anthropocentrism. As secular authors, their perspective is different from deeply devout Christians, who have intrinsic experiences of Faith, therefore, their point of view is theoretically wrong.

(ii) In my dissertation I examine *panexperientialist* critique of Christianity. Panexperientialism starts out from the process philosophy developed by Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Adepts of the theory consider anthropocentrism to be derived from a dualist view, but if such a dualistic interpretation of the world can be transcended, anthropocentric thinking can be transcended as well. The pursuit is present in the *panexperientialist* criticism of Christianity as well.

The philosophy repudiates the inherent value surplus in Man that is so evident in Christian thought, the foundation for the argument being that experience is the principle guiding line in the process (or the history) of the world. Experience is produced by living entities at different levels, but these differences do not generate any value-based hierarchy regarding these entities. Experiences infuse each other, thus the activity (realization) of each and every entity is dependent on the current activity of all the other entities. The inherent values of each entity are present in all the other entities, the intrinsic values of entities form a common network of values. This mutual dependence and mutual experience-transit disregard not only the value-based differences among entities, but the difference between the immanent and the transcendent as well. Therefore, within the world's experience network, neither Man's value surplus in the traditional sense proposed by Western ethics, nor its privileged position within the created world are acceptable.

In my examination of the critique I am going to point out that the ontology of Christianity is not dualistic, therefore the privileged role of Man cannot originate in dualism either. The ontological non-duality of Christianity is corroborated by the doctrine of existence analogy that dominates Christian ontology. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes four levels of existence. The first is the level of *inorganic matter*, the second is the level of *vegetative organisms*, while the third is the level of the *sensitive animals*. The fourth level of the spiritual or intellectual level, *the level of Man*. Christianity would be dualistic if the fourth level were separated from the other three in the same way as the world of the Cartesian *res cogitans* is separated from *res extensa*. However, these levels of existence are not so rigidly delimited, they mutually presuppose and pervade each other. The intrinsic value of entities is to be interpreted based on this principle of gradation as well. Thus, the ontological context of Christianity cannot integrate any kind of ethics that would allow Man to ignore his duties to treat non-human entities respectfully.

(iii) The Green movement was significantly influenced by Daniel Quinn's philosophical novel entitled *Ishmael*. Quinn differentiates between the cultures and communities of the *Leavers* and the cultures and communities of the *Takers*. The work mixes themes that are compatible with Christian standards of values with motifs that are incompatible with these values. The themes presented by Quinn challenge everyone, regardless of their philosophical affiliations, to examine the position they occupy in the *Taker* mechanism. For example, while purchasing a product, to think about what that purchase takes away from other living entities. However, Quinn's view on overpopulation fails when it comes to the rule of thumb: "*So in everything, do to others what you would*

have them do to you". What Quinn, an American who lives in a society with a huge ecological footprint, along with other environmentalists want is to restrict the reproduction of the human populations that live in extreme poverty. However, the excessive load on the environment is caused as much by the excessive consumption that characterizes the developed world as it is caused by overpopulation in the third world. In my view, the approach would have been better, had the author criticized only the Western consumer society that he lives in. However, Quinn's novel can be considered as a work intended to shock, like lightning, and it inspires Christian believers to repeatedly embrace metanoia in relation to nature, in its own vivid dynamism.

(iv) In my dissertation I also examine the analytical critique addressed to anthropocentrism. John Nolt argues that the ethical debates about anthropocentrism employ ideas that are very similar to the ideas used in debates about egoism. Following this train of thoughts, Nolt concludes that by refuting egoism, he will be able to refute anthropocentrism as well. Even though I consider Nolt's critique of anthropocentrism to be incommensurate with Christian anthropocentrism, I still consider his detailed, analytic treatise to be suitable to prompt individuals who live by the principles of Christian anthropocentrism to conduct a detailed self-examination to find out whether the way they treat their environment is free from short-sighted decisions, from greed and from unscrupulous attitude towards non-human entities.

(v) In the dissertation I also examine Lovelock's anthropocentric critique formulated in the Gaia hypothesis. The Gaia hypothesis is one of the pillars of environmental philosophy that criticizes anthropocentrism. I highlighted the following aspects of the opposition against Christianity formulated by the theory:

a.) Lovelock axiomatically uses prayer as the expression of futility and uselessness. In my critique of the critique I argue that prayer cannot be spontaneously used as a synonym of futility. Lovelock points out that non-anthropocentric critics of Christianity often denounce Christianity without knowing it in sufficient depth.

b.) The supernatural beings of polytheist religions, including Gaia, merely by being multiple, by arising, being born, being defeated and depending on each other, carry finite traits that make them transcendent only in the weak sense. Similarly, Lovelock's Gaia concept is also transcendent in the weak sense as Gaia is a complex super-being, identical with the biosphere as a whole. Every pantheistic deity is identical with the material world, therefore it relies, in its existence and in its functioning, on the material world. Based on relevant literature, I proposed the term *complete transcendence* to be used as the antonym of

the concept of transcendence in the weak sense. It is only the God of monotheistic religions that can be *completely transcendent* because in the monotheistic horizon, God serves as the apodictically necessary essence of contingent beings, the unconditioned, ultimate cause of time and space. The concept of transcendence perceived within the framework of the Gaia hypothesis, is transcendence in the weak sense, as the cause for the appearance of earthly life was coincidence. This is in sharp contrast with the thesis that Gaia is in full control of the functioning of its parts and leaves no freedom to its components. The Gaia hypothesis abolishes the traditional image of God and makes the planet itself the focal point of the New Age religious beliefs. In Gaia hypothesis - as in New Age religions in general - everything can be identified with everything. Thus, the distinction between moral good and moral bad applicable in the Christian horizon becomes meaningless. Gaia is an impersonal, abstract deity that does not love Man.

c.) Lovelock considers guilt to be unnecessary when it comes to environment pollution because sin, as a moral problem is independent from the issue of environment pollution. In my review based on the system of Christianity I argued that Christianity also considers useless guilt as a feeling to be avoided, but reasonable guilt is necessary. Contrary to Lovelock's argument, unbearable heat, extreme cold or environmental disasters can be the consequences of human sin. However, what lies behind natural disasters is not active retaliation coming from God, but the self-regulatory processes of nature.

(vi) Malthusian thinkers (Ehrlich, Hardin, Lovelock) combine their anti-democratic views intended to convincingly introduce the necessity to reduce global population with catastrophic eco-pessimism. These thinkers consider that welfare states need to deny food aid and they also need to refuse to take climate refugees. Lovelock argues that due to the environmental crisis, the survival now takes priority over ethical justice.

In Lovelock's view, the solution to the demographic crisis can only come from the transformation of mankind into a social structure similar to the State of Nature. He deems the arrival of a new Churchill in possession of total control and the appearance of the Earth First Battalion to maintain order as necessary. Lovelock also deals with the embarrassing question of who and how many people will inhabit the global, Nature State-like human society that he envisages. In the future, mankind will be reduced to a maximum of half a billion people who must all serve Gaia.

The Christian demographic approach is the exact opposite of the social vision of the Gaia hypothesis. In Christian demographic thinking, there is no need for such adjustment of Man. Christian researchers point to declining population growth and to the fact that Europe

and East Asia are affected by what is called natural population decrease - decrease without migration -, therefore the solution they suggest is conscious and responsible family planning. In their view, Earth has enormous capacities and resources, therefore the question that we need to elucidate is why our goods are so unfairly distributed within our global society - unfair distribution that allows the population of the United States to use 100 times more resources (ecological, biologic) than the population of the poorest continent of the South, Africa. The Christian interpretation of the demographic problem determines the principal cause of environmental pollution to be not anthropocentrism, but the profit-centered selfishness of some and the continuous spreading of the world view serving this profit-centered selfishness. If the self-realization of too many individuals leads to the Christian accumulation and possession of tangible goods, the process will fundamentally undermine the cause of environment protection.

(vii) The next chapter examines the problem of righteousness. Righteousness is a fundamental value the devaluation of which poses serious dangers to individuals and societies as well as to the environment. The denial of righteousness can easily lead to ignoring solidarity and mercy, resulting in unforeseeable consequences for society. Therefore, the Christian ethics that emphasizes righteousness in an appropriate interpretation can be expected to have greater social acceptance than the *Malthusian approach that rejects the value of righteousness*.

In this context, I suggest that righteousness, mercy and solidarity be the criteria for the identification of the movements in environmental ethics that are acceptable in the Christian horizon. These criteria would facilitate the distinction between *righteousness-centered* and *non-righteousness centered* environment ethics. Making use of the criteria righteousness-centered vs. non-righteousness centered would allow us to avoid putting the views of St. Francis of Assisi and Albert Schweitzer with into the same group with movements (biocentrism) that are incompatible with Christianity. Mainstream religious approaches belong to the group of righteousness-centered movements. From the perspective of the righteousness-based point of view on environment ethics, major religions are closer to each other than to any non-anthropocentric movements. Secular non-anthropocentric trends correspond to *non-righteousness-centered trends*. Within the group, Malthusian approaches, especially the Gaia hypothesis or Erlich's demographic views, would fall into a small, separate group of *relentless* approaches.

(viii) Care is the basic concept of Christian environmental ethics. The concept that God loves nature lead many Christians to conclude that people must consider themselves the

stewards and faithful gardeners of nature. In Gen. 2:15 God places Adam in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and to preserve it, or, if you like, to protect it, that is, God essentially calls for man to protect the creation. Those who abuse and mar the created environment, essentially ruin the trust that the Lord has placed in Man as His representative on Earth.

Consequently, Man must rule like Christ. The rule of Christ as the Savior is in conflict with the reign of tyrannical earthly lords. The *Christian* character of Jesus, the Man (anointed, Savior, the King of Heaven) was demonstrated by events that are significantly different from the deeds of common earthly kings. One such event is when Christ washes the feet of His disciples before the Last Supper. Washing the feet of others in the Middle East used to be the task of those who ranked lower in the social hierarchy. The woman had to wash the feet of her husband, the child washed the feet of his father, the non-Jewish slave washed the feet of his lord. Jesus, after washing the feet of his disciples, also invited his disciples to join him in a similar “co-reign”: *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”*

The reign of Christ is the reign of love. Christian faith considers Christ to be consubstantial with the Father. Christ has the greatest love in the world (infinite love), and we, humans can realize only a fraction of it. The love of Christ remains for us, humans, a value that we continuously strive for (including eternal life), a value from which we grow steadily, but also a value that we can never possess in its entirety. The love of Christ is the dominant Love (Love with a capital initial is one of the names of the God of Christianity). All other acts of love are only ‘subjected to it’, that is, they are only immanent and fragmentary manifestations of the greatest love. Our human love therefore follows the love of Christ, but never reaches it, for man and his love are finite, while Christ and his love are infinite on account of their divine nature.

In accordance with the concept of ruling in the Christian sense, Jesus says that blessed are the poor in spirit, that is, blessed are those who can free themselves of the obsession to accumulate worldly treasures. Elsewhere, speaking about material wealth Jesus says: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”, (the kingdom of God here referring to the state of continuous fulfillment in interpersonal love). Christian anthropocentrism proposes that the human being rule over the animals and over the whole created world in partnership with such a Christ. Anthropocentrism in the context of the image of God and the following of Christ cannot be blamed for directly leading to the guilty conduct that overthrows the ecological balance. In

Christian-based environment protection or in the protection of God's creation, anthropocentrism is not some sort of unfortunate civilizational heritage that must be countered or that we are forced to live with. On the contrary, it is a lifelong task and a vocation without which no effective environment protection is possible.

This dissertation, as a whole, can be interpreted as an argument for the model of guardianship and not against eco-centric thinking, but against self-serving profit-centered thinking.

4. The list of the candidate's published academic work in the scope of the dissertation

- Hérány Ferenc: *Az Etika alkalmazása*, in *Valóság* LII (2009/7), pp. 109-111.
- Hérány Ferenc: *Izmael és a kereszténység*, in *Valóság* LIII (2010/12), pp. 13-24.
- Tóth I. János, Hérány Ferenc: *A személy környezetetiki vonatkozásai*, in *A személy bioetiki kontextusa*, (Meditor bioetiki sorozat; 4.), eds. Kőműves Sándor, Rózsa Erzsébet, (Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen 2013.), pp. 239-258.
- Hérány Ferenc: *A lojalitás és a szolidaritás társadalometiki kérdései*, in *Etikák – identitások – perspektívák*, eds. Bertók Rózsa, Barcsi Tamás, (Ethosz Tudományos Egyesület, Pécs 2013), pp. 256-263.
- Hérány Ferenc: *Az antropocentrizmus környezetetiki kritikájának kritikája*, in *Valóság* LVI (2013/4), pp. 11-23.
- Hérány Ferenc, *Milyen horizontú elméletek között lehetséges érdemi vita a környezetfilozófiában?*, in *Valóság* LVIII (2015/7), pp. 92-104.
- Hérány Ferenc, *Kereszténység és erős antropocentrizmus?*, in *Valóság* (2016/6), pp. 22-34.