

Address of HE Metropolitan John of Pergamon

Paper at the Sixth Ecological Symposium on the Amazon River "Humanity and Nature: Learning from the Indigenous"

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Introduction

We are gathered, by the grace of God, in this sixth ecological symposium of Religion and Science which is held under the auspices of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and his Excellency Kofi Anan, the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Our meeting this time is taking place in a geographic area marked with extraordinary beauty of the natural environment – a beauty, however, which is threatened more and more by the activity of "civilized" humanity.

We are, therefore, here not simply in order to admire and enjoy, but also to lament. We are here to reflect together on the causes of the environmental crisis as it is manifested in this particular part of the world, and to ask ourselves the disturbing question why it is that indigenous people have managed to protect the natural environment better than we, civilized Christians, have been able to do.

Several answers to this question could be given. The one that comes first to our minds is the ethical one: it is human greed and the desire for economic development that has led to the exploitation of nature in such a devastating way. This is undoubtedly true. But behind this there lies a deeper reason. It is the fact that in our Western culture a crisis has occurred between the human being and nature. We no longer understand ourselves as parts of nature. This seems to be our fundamental difference from the indigenous people of this land as well as of other lands. We are here, therefore, to learn from those we have tried to convert to our way of thinking. The ecological crisis cannot be overcome unless we are ready to question some of our fundamental philosophical principles by taking into account what other cultures can teach us.

In this presentation I shall focus on two points. The first one is self critical: how have we arrived at the alienation of the human being from nature and, consequently, at the present crisis in the relation between these two? The second point relates more directly to the place where our meeting is being held: what can we learn from cultures different from our own in order to restore our broken relationship with nature?

Our Western culture has been formed under influences from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. We cannot free ourselves from this; neither should we convert to paganism in order to save the environment. And yet many elements from non-Christian cultures can be incorporated into our Judeo-Christian tradition. The time is gone – thank God for that – when Christian religion, in its missionary zeal, confronted other religions with a negative and exclusivist spirit. "Inculturation" is now the aim and method of Christian mission. Let us listen with respect to those indigenous cultures which have managed to survive the zeal of our ancestors who conquered them almost to the point of extinction. This can apply not only to religion but to science as well, particularly to scientific method. Some reflections on this may be also useful.

I. The alienation of the human being from nature

The definition of the human being has been attempted many times in the past without reference or correlation to the natural environment. One classic instance is found in ancient Greek philosophy, chiefly in its Platonic guise, while there have also been numerous theological approaches through the centuries that, in the final analysis, always bore the direct or indirect influence of Platonism. The main form assumed by this definition relied on the concept of the soul. Human identity was seen to reside in the soul, which was thought to be existent and self-subsisting, rather than an organic part of the natural world, its essence being spiritual and not material, and its survival independent of the body's relation to the natural world. This Platonic conception influenced Christian tradition deeply, and its implications were of momentous import to the ecological problem.

The identification of the human being with his soul led to the following assumptions during the course of history:

- a)** The assumption that time and space, fundamental constituents of the natural world surrounding us, make up, along with the perishable body, the prison of the soul. To find himself man must break free from his body, from space and time, i.e. from his natural environment, and live an immaterial and atemporal existence, within an eternity that is not linked to the natural world.
- b)** Since the human being may be conceived without its relation to the natural world, in the final analysis it matters not at all whether or not the natural world surrounding him will be annihilated. In fact, for many exponents of ancient Christian theology, such as Origen and Augustine, in the Kingdom of God, i.e. the ultimate destination and outcome of the world, only souls are to survive: the natural world, apart from the souls of human beings and the incorporeal angels, is destined to disappear.

The answer to the question "what is man" is in this case: insubstantial spirit, immortal and eternal soul, an entity that can be conceived without need of a body or the natural environment.

A similar attempt to identify and define the human being without reference to the natural environment, a modified form of Platonic idealism centered on the soul, was undertaken, mainly in the West from the Middle Ages into modern times, by the definition of man as a rational and intelligent being. The answer given in the case to the question "what is man" was: a rational animal, endowed with thought, self-awareness and awareness of the world. This definition, originating with Augustine and Boethius, came to its culmination with Descartes – an Augustinian monk, father of the Enlightenment and, to a large degree, of modern mathematics and physics – in the form of his illustrious dictum: "cogito ergo sum". The consequences of this had a crucial impact on ecology. Thus:

a) Human beings developed their intellectual capabilities unilaterally, and independently of the body. The development of mathematics as an instrument producing pure "intelligence" led headlong to the emergence of "intelligent beings" that have no need for the human body in order to produce rational thought. The only issue now is whether any residual emotions or appetites remain in the being called man (weak intelligence) or whether even these have been sacrificed (strong intelligence) on the altar of pure, i.e. incorporeal, intelligence. Whatever the case, the important and salient point from an ecological aspect is that intelligence was wrested away from the human body so radically as to abrogate it and render it useless. This is the problem with computers and the internet, and it sharply calls to question the innocence of neutrality in which we usually regard these technological attainments. The great and awful risk attendant on these attainments is that the body is gradually canceled as an instrument of intelligence, given that we think, communicate, market, even fall in love without the body, this unique instrument that connects us with our natural environment – and with other people. As a consequence, the body is more and more incapable of following the amount of information provided by intelligence.

b) The human being developed its intellectual capabilities to the detriment of its natural environment. This came about as the consequence of two factors. The first is that man realized the power enclosed in intelligence. It is not accidental that the mind that declared "cogito ergo sum", namely Descartes, would as early as the seventeenth century, produce the following passage in *Discours de la Methode*: "(with the advancement of science) we can reach knowledge that would be very useful in life and could find a practical method, whereby the force and energies inherent in fire, water, air, the stars, celestial and all other bodies that surround us (=natural environment) might be used in the same manner in all suitable applications, and so we may become masters and possessors of nature (*maitres et possesseurs de la nature*)".

The ecological burden in this pronouncement of Descartes is found in the last few words: "masters and possessors of nature", precisely by dint of *cogito ergo sum*, i.e. the power of knowledge. Therefore Francis Bacon at about the same time addresses the human being in even blunter terms: "I bring you nature and all its progeny that you may bind it to your service and render it as your slave". Is any more clear proof necessary then as to wherein lies the root of our ecological crisis? It lies in the elevation of intellectual capability to the point of its becoming the single, overwhelming determinant

of human identity.

Assuredly, a critique of this view readily springs to mind: might it not be the dominion of intelligence but rather its misuse that is at fault? The same applies to the internet: might the problem actually lie in its misuse? If this is so then the burden falls on ethics. In other words the problem is not that we glorify our intelligence to the detriment of the natural world, but that we misuse it. The solution of the ecological problem is thereby to be found in the domain of ethics. But an ethic deprived of an ontological basis, i.e. lacking a foundation in Truth, is unacceptable from a theological and philosophical aspect. The matter thus is not whether man acts rightly or wrongly (=ethics) but whether he acts in harmony with the truth of his being, of his identity.

The issue is directly related to the dialogue between science, philosophy and theology. It is very easy indeed – and that usually happens – for scientific truth and theological truth not to coincide, and for us to remain unconcerned whether they do coincide or not. The scientist has his or her own truth in the knowledge of nature, and the theologian possesses the "spiritual" truth, which springs from faith. If this is so, where can the scientist meet the theologian? Not of course on the point of truth, since two disparate truths are involved. Their meeting point then is usually found in ethics: both agree whether something is good or bad, permissible or not, etc. the criteria for that lying in the moral values and rules accepted by both sides.

Let us regard the issue particularly in respect of the problem of humanity and its natural environment. Scientists and theologians alike recognize that the natural environment is harmed by the dominion of human intelligence over material nature. If we desired to resolve the problem with the help of ethics we would say: It is not the dominion of intelligence in itself that is harmful, but the fact that it is ill-used. Yet, if we go deeper to the bottom of things, to the marrow of truth, scientists and theologians will ask together: could it be that the ascendancy of intelligence in opposition to man's and the environment's physical and natural substance impinges on the truth of what man is? We cannot let the theologian and the scientist each hold their own views on this matter. The truth about what man is must be common to science and theology. We cannot play with two truths: a truth of knowledge and a truth of faith. The scientist who is faithful to his prayer book, but indifferent as to whether what he observes in his laboratory is compatible with the tenets of his faith, has undergone a schizophrenic rift, and, in any case, has rendered the dialogue between science and theology impossible.

Thus, within any real dialogue of science and theology, the issue of humanity's relation with the natural environment must be focused on the question: what relation of the human being with his natural environment is attuned to the truth of his identity? The answer to this question must achieve as great a convergence as possible between science and theology. Any deviation must be put to the proof and not be ascribed off hand to an incompatibility of underlying assumptions. This is the only way for theology's and science's common stance before the environmental problem to have a solid ontological, and not merely ethical, foundation.

Now, the crucial question in any discussion of humanity's relation to nature is whether the body is essential to the definition of the human being. More specifically, the question is whether the human being has a body or is a body. If the answer lies in the latter, then the body is an element of the truth of his human being, of his identity. But if this is so, then man in the truth of his being is inextricably bound to his natural environment. For how might one conceive of the human body without the rest of material creation?

Those who believe that ultimately, the human body will resurrect, but that the material world will not survive, certainly have a mythical, unreal body in mind. Saint Methodus of Olympus in the fourth century A.D. maintained, in combating Origen, that it cannot be possible that God will resurrect bodies unless he saves material creation in its entirety. As we will see this point is particularly connected with the ecological problem. Any scientific and technological attainment that, in respect of knowledge, abrogates or weakens the role of the body contravenes not ethics, but the truth, the ontology of man.

Precisely because of this indissoluble and ontological relation of man with his body, and through it with his natural environment, the Church Fathers describe man as a 'microcosm', which contains the 'macrocosm' and links by means of his body the material with the intelligible world. It is not accidental that, in order to save man, the Son and Logos of God, became 'flesh' i.e. that He took upon Himself the element of man that links him to his natural environment. If the truth of man were to be found in his soul, then He would only assume a human soul. By taking a human body He demonstrated that man is inconceivable without his body and that He did not come only to save man but all of creation. There can be no greater proof of the importance of the natural environment.

These considerations prove man's organic link with, one might call it dependency on, his physical environment. The fact that man does not 'have' a body but 'is' a body denotes that without his natural environment man himself ceases to be: the truth of man is inextricably bound with all of material creation. This truth is founded on the fact that man was created by God at the end of creation and once the creation of the material world and all the animal kingdom has preceded him. It is typical that in Gnostic systems man appears before the material and animal kingdoms are created. In Holy Scripture the reverse is the case. This declares man's dependence on all of the preceding creation and especially on the animal kingdom. Evolution theory presents no problems for theology from such an aspect. On the contrary, it is welcome insofar as it proves that man is indivisibly bound with the rest of material creation.

II. Restoring the Relation of Humanity with Nature: Learning from the indigenous

One of the characteristics which make up the identity of the indigenous, as described by the World Bank in 1991, is "close attachment to ancestral territories and to the natural resources in these areas." What Western culture has lost for reasons which we have just indicated, the indigenous people have preserved, namely close relationship with nature. There is no sense with them of superiority, let alone domination of the human

being over nature, as we find it in our Western culture; Bacon's and Descartes' arrogance which calls the human being to be "master and possessor" of nature is totally absent. As a consequence, there is no ecological crisis in the culture of the indigenous peoples. How was this achieved? What sort of world view has made this possible?

The thing that has struck those who have studied indigenous culture is the central role that mythology plays in the lives of tribal people. These mythical narratives foster a strong and creative relationship between the indigenous people and their natural environment. They help them develop a holistic approach to nature and, of course, a sense of deep respect for it.

Myth has been almost anathematized in our Western culture. It has been regarded as unworthy of rational beings who are supposed to think only in terms of history, i.e. of events that the human mind can grasp, prove and control. Art and literature, which cannot but operate with myth, are attributed to imagination, i.e. to something we are not supposed to take as true and real.

The most unfortunate result of this has been a split between time and space, and a division within time. Time in our culture is fragmented into past, present and future in order to be measured and thus comprehended and controlled by the human mind. Only what falls within this measurable and rationally controllable time is real and hence believable. Myth, on the other hand, transcends this fragmented time and redeems it. The tribal peoples can live in common union with their ancestors and be happy with that. Myth unites past, present and future into one reality. What the Western people find in art and literature as liberating and redeeming forces in their lives the indigenous people experience as an ordinary reality.

But myth does not unite only the fragmented time; it unites also time with space. All myths borrow their material from space; they liberate space from the bondage of fragmented time making it look eternal, filled with some kind of extra-temporal "divine" presence. Space and time are unbreakably related to each other thanks to myth.

Now, our Western culture has divorced myth from reality to such an extent that the consequences for the human attitude to nature are becoming serious. Nature is treated either as real or as imaginative. Science is assigned to the former, art and literature to the latter, the two remaining always apart. Religion is caught up somewhere in between the two, rejected by science when it leans towards myth, and despised by art when it claims to have reason on its side. If art and science could interpenetrate with the help of myth, the natural environment would benefit enormously.

This leads us to say a few words about scientific method. There seem to be two possible attitudes of the human being to nature in scientific operation. One is to treat nature in the spirit of Bacon and Descartes as an object to be possessed, grasped, conceived and analyzed. This is what Western science seems to do. With the emergence of technology this has reached an extreme form. As Heidegger, who has so deeply penetrated into the subject, has put it, technology differs from previous attitudes

to nature in that thanks to it the human being for the first time in history abstracts energy from nature and stores it as "standing reserve" (Bestand) which can be used for purposes other than those "intended" by nature itself. Chemistry, hydroelectricity, etc. are the extreme results of this scientific treatment of nature.

The indigenous cultures employ an entirely different attitude to nature. Here the key words are observation and relationality, rather than conception and analysis. The scientific method consists in this case in observing how nature works, what each natural element, treated as a living being, does to other beings, including humanity itself. Thus, the indigenous people develop a remarkable knowledge of the pharmaceutical effects of the various plants without analyzing things into their chemical components, as a Western scientist would do, respecting their integrity as if they were divine. This leads to a more holistic approach to nature, something that Western scientists are only now beginning slowly to speak about.

Finally, I shall mention one more characteristic of indigenous cultures which has much to do with the natural environment. It is the place of ritual in these cultures. Ritual is another thing that Western culture has treated with contempt. Even Orthodox Christians think of it as unworthy of educated people, avoiding to cross themselves or to attend Church services which, in the case of the Orthodox, are loaded with ritual. And yet, there is a very deep connection between ritual and respect for nature. For all ritual acts involve nature in man's relationship to God, while all forms of worship which leave out ritual exclude automatically nature as well. The human being can not go to God alone, without its natural environment. Humanity is part of nature, and therefore a liturgical being. The recovery of liturgical ethos is the best way to obtain environmental consciousness and sensitivity.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in the limited space of my paper how serious it is for our attitude to the environment the dissociation of the human being from nature in our Western culture and how open we should be to what the indigenous cultures can teach us in this respect. As I have already indicated, we do not have to convert to paganism in order to save the natural environment. Paganism respects nature but it also cultivates a fear of it. Respect and fear must be distinguished from each other. Western culture has liberated humanity from the fear of nature but it has at the same time destroyed all respect for it. We must learn from indigenous cultures to respect nature and feel that we are part of it. We must free ourselves from the only dangerous myth there is, namely that the human being through its mind and reason can grasp reality and control it. Reality and nature itself are much broader than our human minds can grasp and comprehend, and, whether we believe in a personal God or not, we must treat with respect all that escapes our reason, including nature itself.

As we set foot on these lands of the Amazonian river we all feel the damage that our Western Christian world has done to the native peoples and their land. The exploitation

of natural resources that is taking place is beginning to worry those who care for the environment. But perhaps we should worry even more that there is very little left of the culture from which we can learn. For the ecological crisis is above all a matter of culture, and in order to overcome the crisis we must be willing to learn from each other.

