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**ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE
ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS: PART OF THE
PROBLEM OR PART OF THE SOLUTION?**

Abstract

The world is facing numerous challenges, the most prominent being the ever growing world population and the spread of urban areas. In the quest for more food and resources, entire ecosystems are poisoned by pesticides. Man-made disasters have added oil to the fire. Climate Change poses an additional challenge. The key question is which paradigm is responsible for the ecological crisis. A group of authors locate the root causes for the environmental crisis in ethics and argue that humanity's attitude towards nature depends on its perception of nature. More precisely, the arguments gravitate around the role of religion and, in particular, Christianity. One group of authors holds a view that religion, by establishing a dualistic paradigm that prioritizes humans over nature, is responsible for the uncontrolled exploitation of nature. Another group argues that it is precisely the relativization and rejection of religious ethical and moral values that contributed to the abandoning of the idea of nature as something wonderful and special, which eliminates the sense of responsibility towards nature. This paved the way for mastering over nature. The aim of this paper is to analyze the arguments of two opposing views in order to determine whether religion has a generally positive or negative impact on the environment.

Keywords: ecology, environmental crisis, religion, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

In 1804 the world population reached 1 billion people. Today, only 213 years after the first billion there are approximately 7.484 billion people. It is expected that by 2050 the world population will reach 9.7 billion people with needs for water, food, shelter, resources and predictability (UN DESA, 2015). The density of the urban population is also increasing. The 21st will be an urban century. In 2014, 54% of the population already inhabited urban areas. It is expected that by 2050 approximately 66% of the world population will live in cities. According to UN Habitat every week about 3 million people migrate to the cities (IOM 2015). This creates a snowball effect. Forests are cut down and swamps are dried up in order to expand arable lands in order to satisfy growing demands for food. In this quest for food and resources, entire ecosystems are poisoned by pesticides. Man-made disasters, such as Bhopal and Chernobyl have added oil to the fire. Today, Climate Change poses an increasing challenge.

These disturbing processes prompted an ongoing debate about the causes of the environmental crisis.

Some, like Paul R. Ehrlich point to the explosive population growth as the main reason behind the environmental crisis (Ehrlich 1968). In its estimation of the limits of growth, The Club of Rome includes materials and energy extracted from the Earth and the capacity of the planet to absorb the pollution generated by the use of those same materials and energy sources. The authors concluded that unless the intensity of the processes remains unchanged, planet Earth will face an ecological and economic crisis in the 21st century (Meadows, D. H. 1972). Barry Commoner in "The Closing Circle" argues that the crisis is a result of the consumer lifestyle in industrialized societies, noting that the developed countries use much more resources than undeveloped countries (Commoner 1971). Others, yet, argue that the human impact on environment is a consequence of three interconnected factors: population, abundance and technology. Hence the formula: $I = P \times A \times T$ (Chertow, MR 2000).

However, it can be argued that the focus of these authors is more on the consequences than on the real causes of the ecological crisis. The root causes can be found in the worldviews or paradigms. According to Thomas S. Kuhn, each paradigm has two basic functions: the cognitive function means that the paradigm is the prerequisite to perception itself; the normative function enables the paradigm to regulate and influence reality (Kuhn 1996). Therefore, the key question is which paradigm is responsible for the ecological crisis.

DEBATE ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION

A group of authors locate the root causes for the environmental crisis in ethics and argue that humanity's attitude towards nature depends on its perception of nature (De Žarden 2006). More precisely, the arguments gravitate around the role of religion and, in particular, Christianity. The aim of this paper is to analyze the arguments of two opposing views in order to determine whether religion has a generally positive or negative impact on the environment.

In order to correctly understand the role of religion in the context of the ecological crisis, the author will use Rudolf Otto's idea of the holy.¹ The main reason for introducing the idea of God in the debate about humanity's role in the ecological crisis is the influence that this particular idea has on man's relation with nature. In this regard, there are two opposing views.

For the first, the exploitation of nature is a direct result of the Christian doctrine of creation. In his influential essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" published in 1967, Lynn White Jr. states that "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them". In this regard, White makes two major claims. First, he argues that as a form of worldview, religion is the root cause for the ecological crisis. Second, he argues that the Judeo-Christian idea of a humanity that dominates the world contributed to a development of an understanding that nature exists solely to satisfy human needs. This legitimizes the uncontrolled exploitation of nature. According to White the Judeo-Christian tradition that perceives man as a master of nature is to be blamed for the contemporary ecological crisis. More precisely, he argues that "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen" (White 1967). This doctrine created a dualistic paradigm that has separated man from nature, and installed man as a ruler of creation, thus prioritizing humans over nature (Nelson 2016). Furthermore, White believes that religious narratives about salvation create environmentally benign worldviews (Jenkins 2008:11).

¹ According to Otto, there is a feeling that is common for all religions. In Hebrew is called *qadosh/qadash*, in Greek *ayios*, in Latin *sanctus/sacer*. Otto calls this feeling *Numinous* (from Latin *Numen* which means power, presence and manifestation of a deity, a divine presence). *Numinous* means that humans feel that they are created and dependent from some supreme, overpowering might. *Numinous* is a non-rational, non-sensual experience that can be described with one expression – *mysterium tremendum* (a threatening mystery). *Tremendum* has three elements: (1) awefulness, tremor, dread; (2) overpoweringness or *majestas* which evokes humbleness; (3) energy, creating an impression of a limitless energy. *Mysterium* has two elements: (1) The wholly other, meaning something amazing and beyond the ordinary experience and (2) the fascinating or *Fascinans*, which causes admiration (Otto, 1923). Otto's concept and understanding of the Holy is the common denominator of all religions and forms of religious belief. However, for the sake of terminological clarity, brevity and consensus, the term "God" will be used through the rest of this article.

By arguing that religion, and Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, is the root cause of the ecological crisis, White challenged the prevailing views that saw technology and overpopulation as the sources of the environmental problem (LeVasseur and Peterson 2016: 2).

In his later essay “Continuing the Conversation” published in 1973, White reaffirms his earlier positions, claiming that the “man-nature dualism is deep-rooted in us” and “[u]ntil it is eradicated not only from our minds but also from our emotions, we shall doubtless be unable to make fundamental changes in our attitudes and actions affecting ecology.” (White 1973:55-64).

White stirred a five decades long debate, propelling as one of his critics Alister McGrath. He partially agrees with White by pointing out that humanity’s approach to nature depends on humanity’s perception of nature. However, unlike White, he argues that humans treat nature as something sacred as long as nature provokes a feeling of wonder.² Once man begins to think that he can explain all aspects of nature, the feeling of wonder evaporates, and nature loses its sanctity. This opens the door for exploitation and irresponsible approach towards nature (McGrath 2003).

Furthermore, McGrath argues that the origins of the environmental crisis can be traced back to the rejection of religion and its basic ethical and moral values. This rejection gave birth to a worldview of human autonomy that perceives nature as a mechanism that is subordinated to humans. The removal of religious ethical and moral values contributed to the abandoning of the idea of nature as something wonderful and special, which eliminates the sense of responsibility towards nature. According to McGrath, not only that religion cannot be blamed for the irresponsible approach towards nature, but, on the contrary, respect of nature is embedded in religious tradition. This is true for most world religions, such as Christianity, Judaism (Strawn, 2012)³

² C. S. Lewis notices that the sense of wonder we experience from nature is not meant to satisfy us; it is meant to make us yearn for the greater wonder that it silently signposts and whispers will one day be ours. Kirman argues that Islam considers nature an open book that invites us to investigate it, and which actually increases the faith of the researcher. In some verses of the Quran, all creatures, including plants and animals, the sun and the stars are called “*ayat*” – signs of Allah that pay witness to him. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism share a similar belief in the presence of the divine in all things, in all animate and inanimate nature (Kirman 2008).

³ Strawn makes a parallel between the warnings regarding the land pollution in Judaism and contemporary warnings for the environmental pollution. In Leviticus, there is a clear statement that those who pollute the land will be punished – the land will “vomit out” those who defile her. In the Book of Jonah, the fish “vomits out” Jonah after he repents for his disobedience to God. The contemporary narrative corresponds with the religious Jewish narrative: overburdened by overexploitation, the Earth will cease to satisfy the growing needs of humanity, and will “vomit out” the polluters. The only way out is for humanity to repent for its unsustainable practices and start working on the protection of the planet and the people, by achieving sustainable development (Strawn 2012).

(Clugson, 2012)⁴, Islam (Clugson, 2012)⁵ and others.⁶

Two central Jewish and Christian doctrines support this claim: the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of God.

According to the doctrine of creation, nature points out to something bigger than herself – the Creator. In McGrath’s words, “nature is like a mirror, itself beautiful while reflecting an even greater beauty of God.” The antipode of the spiritual is the materialistic understanding which sees nature as an end in itself, instead of a beauty that reflects an even greater beauty (McGrath 2003: 11-16).

The doctrine of God is more complex. On one hand is deism which holds that, after creating the world, God is no longer involved in its affairs. On the other hand is pantheism which reduces God to a life force within the world. McGrath opposes these two ideas with the concept of the Trinity: God is not only creator of the world, but also abides in the world. The logical implications of this claim are immense. Namely, if the world is worth of being a dwelling place of its creator, than humans must respect the world (McGrath 2003: 49).

By analyzing the environmental values present in various Christian denominations, McGrath notices that most of them have developed concepts for care for nature and creation. In Celtic Christianity⁷ nature is not only a object of adoration, but also as a means of knowing God, since nature gives a sense of his presence (McGrath 2003: 32-34). Various Christian traditions point to this special relation to nature (McGrath 2003: 37-40):

1. Sinfulness of humanity: greed and the tendency for exploitation have a negative impact on the environment.
2. The Land belongs to God, not to humans: the created order is to be cherished as a gift from God. Humanity does not possess the land and has no right to exploit it as it pleases.
3. Destruction of nature is a sin: this position is especially present in Eastern Orthodoxy. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (known as “the Green Patriarch”) considers human life and creation as a sacrament. Bartholomew

⁴ Amswych mentions several Talmud sustainable development mechanisms: sabbatical year; sustainable and stable market economy based on direct contact between producers and consumers; economy organized around real needs; equality and interconnectedness of people; moral responsibility towards future generations (Clugson, 2012:16-20).

⁵ Nough summarizes the following Islamic sustainable development principles: (1) respect for people; (2) understanding the environment; (3) balance; (4) limited resources; (5) protection of the environment (Clugson, 2012:39-43).

⁶ Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism emphasize the respect for others, social harmony and interconnection with nature. These values are closely related to sustainable development. Furthermore, they focus on collective rather than individual efforts, which resonates to the need for global responsibility and action (Clugson, 2006: 4-8).

⁷ Christianity practiced in Ireland in the 7th and 8th centuries.

advocates for the principle of asceticism understood as a self-discipline of humanity which is necessary for correcting our environmental approach,⁸ but also for a “liturgical” approach understood as a celebration of nature.⁹

McGrath believes that we should not look for the reasons for the environmental crisis in religion, but in the “deliberate human decision to reject the idea of God in order to promote human freedom. Without God humanity must no longer work under authority and under limits, but is free to do as it pleases.” By erasing the idea of God, people actually erase the limits for exploitation of nature. This means that people are free to do what they please. Contrary to White who sees Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism as the root cause for environmental degradation, McGrath argues that the combined 20th century Western secular beliefs which arose from the 18th century Enlightenment are the most anthropocentric “religion” in history. The central idea of Enlightenment is that man is the measure of all ideas and values (McGrath 2003:52-61). In this context, Steven Vogel notices that “[t]he project of enlightenment aims above all at the domination of nature. Disenchanted and objectified nature, appearing now in the guise of meaningless matter, is seen by enlightenment simply as something to be overcome and mastered for human purposes, and not to be imitated, propitiated, or religiously celebrated” (Vogel 1996). In this sense, the root of human domination over nature can be found in the idea that the world exists to satisfy the needs of humans. In the center of this paradigm is Protagoras claim that “man is the measure of all things.”

Led by the idea that man’s liberation and self-realization can be achieved through domination over nature, modern Western culture saw God and nature as obstacles to the unstoppable human progress. The religious obstacles to what man could and could not do to nature had to be removed in order for man to conquer and subdue nature. The elimination of the idea and concept of God would mean the elimination of the last obstacle for the unlimited human autonomy. People would be able to do what they wish and nothing would be impossible. The paradox is that, by dethroning God, humanity could enthrone itself and rule over nature (McGrath 2003:63).

⁸ “...the natural environment is part of Creation and is characterized by sacredness. This is why its abuse and destruction is a sacrilegious and sinful act...Humanity, too, is part of this Creation. Our rational nature, as well as the capacity to choose between good and evil, bestows upon us certain privileges as well as clear responsibilities.” (Bartholomew 2009).

⁹ The liturgical approach should trigger a feeling of mystical respect and genuine affection towards nature. This approach renews the covenant among people, nature and God by correcting the egocentric obsession with selfish needs and wasteful consumerism (Bartholomew 2006).

However, man's dream to dominate nature would have remained only a dream had it not been for technology. Freed from the "chains" of ethics, technology became an end in itself, or, more precisely, a means for achieving the aims which include riches, power and influence. By developing technology, humanity could master nature. In other words, humanity had triumphed over God in whom it ceased to believe, and over nature, which it started to use for satisfying its own needs.

CONCLUSION

While weighing the arguments for the role of religion in the environmental crisis, it can be pointed out that most of the arguments emphasize the positive role of religion in developing and sustaining an environmentally responsible behavior. The ethical values related to human approach towards nature, resources and sustainability of development stem from spiritual traditions and beliefs which are based on the transcendent perception of nature and humanity's place in it. In most cases, these beliefs and traditions are integral part of numerous religions.¹⁰ At the same time, the negligence and even rejection of religion can have a negative impact on the environment. In the case of Christianity, the relativization of the idea of God in early modernity led to a relativization of man's limitations for the exploitation of nature. The rejection of the idea of God during the Enlightenment led to a complete rejection of the previously established norms, thus opening the door for uncontrolled exploitation of nature. This implies that religion and religious ethical values should be taken in consideration in the policy making process related to sustainable development and environmental protection. It can be concluded that it is religion and the basic ethical teachings that are necessary for a responsible approach of humanity towards nature.

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¹⁰ M. E. Tucker argues that world religions can contribute to the process of redefining sustainability, offering the following general principles and values shared by all world religions: worship, respect, restraint, allocation, responsibility and restoration. (Clugson et al, 2012:1-3).

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