

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

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Since around 1970 it has been a widespread accusation that biblical religion had a terrible effect on some basic assumptions in Western civilisation. The Bible, so the story goes, tore apart heaven and earth, creator and creation, God and the world. Nature was bereft of its sacred aspects and left religiously “defenceless”. So mankind took it for granted or even as an obligation to exploit the earth mercilessly which led to the ecological disasters that emerged after the 2nd world war. The main focus was on *dominium terrae* (Gen 1, 28), the cornerstone of pure “anthropocentrism”. This is where the ecological movement located the main error of Christianity (and Judaism). Let us see closer what had happened.

I.

The story sparked off with an article published in *Science* in 1966: It was Lynn Whites: *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*. White’s main focus was on the *dominium terrae*, a catchphrase taken from *Genesis*. The ecological crises which became clearer in the sixties (and even more in the seventies) were due to Western Civilisation. More precisely: due to its religious arrogance against “nature”. The biblical account of creation focussed solely on mankind. Plants, animals, natural resources were only created to serve as means for man’s needs and purposes. Thus White followed an interpretation of Judaism and Christianity which had been laid out before by the German sociologist Max Weber. Weber had claimed that the religions of the Bible had ripped off the earth from any religious *numen*, significance – and holiness. Weber took it as an important step forward towards modern industrial civilisation or at least as one of its prerequisites. Lynn White gave it a different twist: For the consequences of Western civilisation were disastrous, the Bible should take the blame. He and his followers pinpointed it in one phrase: *dominium terrae*. It was the Bible’s commandment that man should reign the Earth, govern it, and exploit it like tyrants exploit their countries.

The basis was Gen. 1,28. In the King James Version the passage reads: *And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.* The Vulgate

translated the keywords קבץ as *subicere* und דרר as *dominare*¹ – therefore we are talking of *dominium terrae*. I do not want to interfere with the exegetical perspective on the text in question whether these translations are correct. It is worth mentioning that the key phrase of “dominating the world” follows right after the verse: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him*. This is the highest praise of man’s dignity in the Old Testament and could be taken as the justification for ruling the world. Man claims the highest position among God creatures. As Psalm 8 (verse 6 and 7) puts it quite drastically:

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.

The history of Western theology and philosophy contains many interpretations of what is meant by *image of God*. And the development of Western science is closely connected to this arrogant self esteem. Because of the unique position of man in the whole of creation it was his right and even his obligation to rule the world. This is plausible but I just do not want to trace back this long evolution.² A rather different approach comes from H. Kessler.³ His main thesis is almost the reverse: Radical anthropocentrism was not a consequence of the biblical tradition but of its loss in Renaissance and early modern period. I cannot finally judge the thesis that only Christianity was able to encourage men to change the face of the earth so profoundly. Nor can I judge the accusation that Christian doctrine was an important contribution to the ecological crisis.

All I can say is that the Lynn White’s main point on *dominium terrae* had an enormous impact.⁴ In 1972 Carl Amery published his book: *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums*. Almost ten years later (1981) appeared Eugen Drewermann’s *Der tödliche Fortschritt. Von der Zerstörung der Erde und des Menschen im Erbe des Christentums*. One has only to listen to the prophetic sound of the titles: *The End of Providence. The Merciless Consequences of Christianity*. The second title could run: *Deadly Progress. The Destruction of the Earth and Humanity as Christian Legacy*.

Dominium terrae was the catchphrase. The disastrous ecological legacy of biblical believes was the message. “Anthropocentrism” was the technical term for it.

A rather influential interpretation for the ecological movement may be found in the writings of K. M. Mayer-Abich. According to his reading⁵ Christian

¹ *Benedixitque illis Deus et ait crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam et dominamini piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et universis animantibus quae moventur super terram*. German Versions have *herrschen* and *unterwerfen* (*Einheitsübersetzung*) und *untertan machen* (Luther, 1524).

² There is a fine article on the *Wirkungsgeschichte*: Krolzik, U., „Die Wirkungsgeschichte von Genesis 1,28”. In: Altner, G., (ed.): *Ökologische Theologie*. Stuttgart, 1989.

³ Kessler, H., “Die Gründe der *Christlichen Anthropozentrik*”. In: Herberholz, M., Sölling, C., (eds.): *Menschenrechte für Menschenaffen*. Paderborn, 2003.

⁴ Cf. Baranzke, H., „Lynn White und das *dominium terrae*” (Gen 1,28b). In: *Biblische Notizen*. H 76, München, 1995.

⁵ Mayer-Abich, K.M., *Wege zum Frieden mit der Natur*: „Im anthropozentrischen Weltbild sehen wir

anthropocentrism has reduced nature to a mere surrounding. It has misled Christianity to forget nature as a whole.

“Anthropocentrism” implies a strong accusation, next to egoism and carelessness and ignorance.

II.

But indeed: To focus on man, to centre on *anthropos* can have quite a variety of meanings. I would like to name four versions of the ill famed “anthropocentrism”; what can it mean.

1. „Anthropocentrism” can be the idea that everything was created to serve human needs, e.g. tides were created for easy shipping. This idea had strong support in the age of Enlightenment: Nature was assembled quite practically and it was perfectly arranged for human beings. This idea is obsolete for many reasons. Just to mention one: we do not really believe at all that anything on earth was made for a purpose – technically speaking: teleology is no longer on the agenda. Something may be planned *by* man, but it hardly can be planned *for* man.
2. Much stronger: “anthropocentrism” may mean, man has an unlimited right to exploit anything as he wishes. This is the focal meaning of the term “anthropocentrism” when used in discussions on the Christian responsibility for ecological values. Well, it evidently sounds much more like 19th century than 21st: Hardly anyone would advocate this type of anthropocentrism. But it is not easy to prove the contrary. Many attempts have been made to establish a theory to explain why other beings, especially plants or animals, should have “intrinsic value“ or „inherent worth“ or should be regarded as „good of their own“. Although these theories are difficult to substantiate, it is clear that hardly anyone would claim man’s right to use anything on this planet for his own purpose.
3. After Kant, anthropocentrism can mean the simple message: All human knowledge is human knowledge. There is no way around it. We will always judge anything according to the human perspective.
4. Finally we have to talk on the very special capability of human beings and, at the same time, of their very special obligations. To quote a phrase from the German theologian F.W. Graf ⁶: It is about reflective anthropocentrism.

alles, was mit uns ist, nur von uns aus, so dass die Mitwelt zur bloßen Umwelt des Menschen schrumpft. (...) Die christliche Theologie ist durch ein zu stark auf den Menschen und zu wenig auf die Schöpfung im Ganzen gerichtetes Denken mitverantwortlich für das anthropozentrische Weltbild.” Quotations taken from S. Daecke: „Anthropozentrik oder Eigenwert der Natur?“ In: Altner, G., *Ökologische Theologie*. Stuttgart, 1989.

⁶ See: Graf, F.W., „Reflektierter Anthropozentrismus“, In: *Augsburger Forschungsschwerpunkt Ökologie*. Separatdruck aus dem Jahrbuch der Universität Augsburg 1996/97, Augsburg

This basically means that we as human beings have a very specific obligation resulting from special capabilities: Human beings are capable of acting according to moral principles which they can articulate and communicate in language. This may sound simple, but it is not. (I personally went through some hefty quarrels about the topic.⁷) It is no longer easy to advocate this special and specific role man plays in nature.

My own studies focussed on recent developments in founding a new relationship between man and animal. The main topic is to reverse biblical “anthropocentrism”. After Darwin we allegedly should forget our special status among all beings. After all we are just mammals.⁸ We should realize that we are just one link in the great chain of life; other religions (especially those in the East) always maintained the great unity of life. In central Europe some theologians even staged religious services with animals as equal members of the congregation.

We are nothing special. This point of view thrives on various intellectual movements. One clearly is Darwinism which in many variations conquers public opinion. Another, more intellectual movement was initiated by Peter Singers writings on *Animal Liberation* (1975) and *Practical Ethics* (1979). Singer circulated the term “speciesism” – an analogy to “racism” and “sexism”. To deprive someone of his rights because of his race – is racist. To deprive someone of his rights because of his biological species – is speciest. All animals are equal. Why should we be allowed to impose the same level of suffering easier on a rat than on a human being? Why should we kill animals for the brief lust of eating meat? And so on.

But the misconception at the basis of all others is: even if we *ought* to defend animals’ rights just as we ought to defend human rights – this cannot be based on *basic equality* of humans and animals. Animals do not respect others’ rights, especially not the rights of anyone not belonging to the same family, same herd or same species. Just one glimpse on the rules of “Animal Kingdom” simply proves it: No one cares! To *spare* one’s life is not on the agenda. It simply does not happen anywhere else outside human or humane conditions.

This does not mean we should not care either. We can act and we ought to act in a different way. But this presupposes that we *can* behave in a different manner. All moral mandates imply the certain condition of human behaviour. This is the basic point: To take responsibility for animals clearly requires gifts and abilities that are not to be found in the animal kingdom. To claim moral standards towards animals presupposes a very different attitude – unique to human beings. We have to take a specifically human responsibility.

There is no point in founding animal ethics on the equality of man and animals. Even if we admit that our own species is a product of the same evolution. Even if we suppose that animals share some of our cognitive abilities. Even if we

⁷ See the controversy with Seidel, U., in *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* where my article “Mensch – Tier – Mensch” (*Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* 9/2004) caused some harsh replies.

⁸ Mark Rowlands has published a book *Animals Like Us*. Some years ago there was a popular rock song, dubbed “Nothing but mammals”.

accepted that animals should have the same rights as human beings (something I would not subscribe) – this all refers to animals as moral *objects*.

But when dealing with moral agents, describing those that would or can act according to moral standards, we must imply abilities which are – allegedly – unique to us.

III.

I would like to broaden this argument: In many respects of bioethics, there is no point in referring to the biological connections between man and nature, but to firmly accept that we are “something else”. Bioethics requires standards not to be found in biology or in “nature”; this means we have to keep our distance from it.

The 19th century may have taken *dominium terrae* as a justification for an irresponsible exploitation of the earth. Late 20th century took it as a kind of malediction and many religious thinkers tried to reverse its meaning which, in my opinion, is impossible and even pointless. We have left nature, and to gain morale we cannot turn back to nature.

My proposal would be: Read *dominium terrae* as a very demanding moral obligation to take a proper human ethical responsibility. Because in the end: We are hardly free not to act. And we are certainly not free not to act as human beings.