

Human Dignity and Human Ecology

articolo

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Introduction

This paper looks at the relationship between human dignity and human ecology. It first briefly traces the origins of human dignity and its present-day usage, and then points out the different philosophical, historical and ecological currents that minimize or deny dignity. Next it presents a correct vision of human beings in relation to their surroundings from a Christian perspective that is termed human ecology. From this perspective, the ecological problem can be resolved only if we accept God as Creator, and humans as creatures given a gift to care for nature as priest, prophet and king. A Christian understanding of human dignity recognizes our spiritual nature damaged by sin but also capable of growth in virtues to tackle the ecological challenge morally and responsibly. Against a utilitarian and consumerist tendency, this will also entail recognition of the value of human life at all stages of development. Man's higher calling also avoids the two extremes of optimism and pessimism, by penetrating the mystery of eschatological hope.

Human Dignity and Challenges from the Ecology Movements

There is a recent interest regarding the question of human dignity in bioethics. Even though dignity is a relatively common term, there are scholars who find it too non-specific, generic or even ideological¹. The multidisciplinary study of *Human Dignity and Bioethics* published by the President's Council

on Bioethics demonstrates that dignity is not a simple concept but one that embraces different notions derived from many sources: classical Greco-Roman writers, the Judeo-Christian tradition, modern philosophy and the language of human rights.

The instruction *Dignitas Personae* published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith best expounds the Catholic position on human dignity². This document categorically affirms that human dignity is intrinsic and present in all human persons from conception to natural death (no. 1). Respect for human dignity implies, therefore, protection of human life and the integrity of the procreative act which constitutes the basis of marriage and family life (no. 6). The theological foundations of human dignity are manifold. A theological basis of our dignity is the goodness of our creation in the image and likeness of God. Furthermore, the magisterium makes the argument for intrinsic human dignity from a Christian perspective. Finally, the eschatological dimension is present in this vision of human dignity since our end is to live in eternity with God³.

The notion of human dignity also finds some opposition in the ecology movement. Paradoxically, certain environmental groups which advocate against animal cruelty would support the destruction of human lives, especially in their earliest stages. I have described the historical and philosophical backdrop to this misanthropic vision of dignity in another paper. Some of its conclusions are summarized here⁴.

One cause of this vision is scientific materialism which reduces humans to the level of



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things. A materialistic and mechanistic conception of man and nature posits a universe where there can be no differences between human beings and animals. There is no place for the human soul either. This line of thinking is found in the evolutionary theories of Darwin and his followers who suggest that we are not substantially superior to animals, as human behaviors are just more complex evolved variations of primitive animal cultures⁵. Richard Dawkins, a modern disciple of this theory, explains the evolution of morality in *The Selfish Gene*⁶. Human behaviors are thus interpreted in terms of animalistic stimulus-response of “appetites and aversions”⁷.

Another materialistic conception of man which poses a challenge to human dignity is transhumanism. In place of random chance of evolution, transhumanists campaign for self-directed enhancement of humans by overcoming our present limitations with modern technology. They believe that we may reengineer the human race through artificial intelligence, cybernetics, nanotechnology, cryopreservation, regenerative medicine, stem cells therapy, cloning, the creation of hybrids and chimeras, and other similar technologies. As I have stated elsewhere, this understanding considers human nature to be liquid and changing rather than stable and universal. In fact, technology becomes the tool to manipulate our human nature, but at a great risk of losing our humanity in this process⁸.

Another corollary to this challenge is found in the exaltation of animal and environmental rights. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans are special among all creatures because they are created in the image and likeness of God. Critics find this understanding too anthropocentric and wish to extend this special status to animals, plants, and nature as bearers of dignity and rights. Bioethicist Peter Singer is perhaps the most out-spoken in this regard, and considers the idea that human beings are

superior to any other non-human species a form of discrimination or “speciesism”. Humans are in reality no different from animals, just another form of great apes⁹. If humans are not special, then they have no special dignity.

Whether humans have special dignity or not can have great implications on the ecological question. As we have seen, secular visions that disregards human dignity tend to fluctuate between optimism and pessimism with regards to our ecological future. Optimists are excessively presumptions in conceiving a utopian prospect where technology can transform humanity and its environment. We see this in the transhumanist proposal, but this optimistic outlook is also found among Christian thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) whose philosophy is

heavily influenced by the idealism of Hegel¹⁰.

Pessimists, on the other hand, are often alarmed by the dangers humanity poses to his environs through greed and irresponsibility. Deep ecologists accuse humans of exploiting and abusing the

environment causing pollution, deforestation, climate changes, animal extinctions, and overpopulation, etc. As a result, the earth is overpopulated and there are not sufficient resources for sustained development, with disastrous consequences¹¹. In this paradigm, Alan Gregg asserts, “The world has cancer and the cancer is man”¹².

Once again, both the optimist and the pessimist miss the mark because of their materialistic prejudice. By negating finality in creation and our spiritual capacity, the predictions of technological well-being or hopeless dystopia are flawed. In this light, the Christian response offers a surprising alternative to the modern dilemma.

Moral and human ecology

It is unfortunate that some schools of environmentalists consider Christianity to be an

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enemy rather than an ally. The caricature of Christian views as egoistic anthropocentrism is not accurate. Careful reading of the *Book of Genesis*, and recent pronouncements of the Catholic magisterium reveal a very different picture. Although the environmental question was already of concern in the pontificate of Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, it was John Paul II who developed and popularized the language of “human ecology” which made its way into magisterial writings in subsequent pontificates¹³. Benedict XVI summarizes this teaching in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature¹⁴.

The language of human ecology is an attempt to recapture the sense of human dignified actions with regards to his environment. Christian theology emphasizes the harmonious relationship between human beings, nature, and God. God the Creator has given humanity the gift of nature, something that he or she has to take care of and cultivate. The relationship between man and his environment should not be one of power of domination, but should be shaped by harmony and responsibility. Even the non-believing philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, observes that our common status as creatures is the basis of our radical equality. He is worried about the practices of liberal eugenics which can undermine this and the foundation of western democracy¹⁵.

Paul Haffner explains how redeemed humanity has the vocation as priest, prophet and king in Christian spirituality¹⁶. Biblical exegetes have agreed that in the first chapter of *Genesis*, the account of creation is liturgical, with man placed in the center of creation as a priest. Hence, his priestly duty consists in liturgical worship of God through the temple of nature. This aspect of sanctification of the cosmic temple of the world is emphasized in Orthodox spirituality. Western Christianity has focused on the part of *Genesis* where man is considered the crown of creation and entrusted with the task of naming the created order, ruling it and cultivating it responsibly. It is both a kingly mission and stewardship to look after the master’s property while he is away¹⁷. Monastic movements and Franciscan spirituality have embraced this spirit of harmonious coexistence and stewardship of nature. Recently, the Reformed traditions have underlined the prophetic dimension of announcing the need for radical solidarity and justice in the care of environment¹⁸.

In reality, a balanced understanding of the proper relationship between humans and their surroundings must involve a proper understanding of man’s dignity. When human dignity is denied, his roles as priest, steward or prophet diminish and so the ecological problem becomes more acute. In fact, the ecological problem is foremost a spiritual-moral problem. Humanity has been given creation so that man can carry out God’s plan, but it is sin that makes him act as a lone protagonist and egotistic seeker of personal gratification. When we have lost the sense of God as creator, we mistreat nature and other creatures, because the sense of being a steward is lost as is the need to worship God through the temple of nature¹⁹. Pope Benedict XVI asked in a 2009 audience address:

Is it not true that an irresponsible use of creation begins precisely where God is marginalized or even denied? If the relationship between human creatures and the Creator is forgotten, matter is reduced to a selfish possession, man becomes the “last word”, and

the purpose of human existence is reduced to a scramble for the maximum number of possessions possible²⁰.

The problem with a materialistic concept of man, devoid of his spirituality, actually reduces his responsibility towards his environment. Pope John Paul II recognizes that the question of environmental ecology is above all a question of moral ecology in his Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*:

In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the *human environment*, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves. Although people are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic “human ecology”*²¹.

While it is true that humans are partly responsible for many wounds inflicted on the environment, it is also true that they can be the solution to these problems once there is conversion of heart. This change involves recognizing that ecology is first of all an ethical question and humanity cannot be dominated by utilitarianism, consumerism and technological solutions. While the damage to the environment comes from our actions, it is only through growth in virtue and moral strength that we can repair this damage²².

The reversal of this technocratic and utilitarian mindset also linked the ecology problem to that of the aforementioned question of human dignity. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have repeatedly linked respect for the environment with respect for the inviolability of human life²³. John Paul II writes in *Evangelium Vitae*:

To defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task which God entrusts to every man, calling him as his living

image to share in his own lordship over the world... It is the ecological question-ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and other forms to “human ecology” properly speaking—which one finds in the Bible a clear and strong ethical direction leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life... 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 impunity²⁴.

Eschatology, Salvation and Hope

The materialistic worldview is one without finality and hope. Doubts regarding ecology are manifestations of a lack of hope in humanity’s future, in a world without God and his providence. In fact, there is a certain convergence in the two political spectrums of communism or liberation theology and capitalism: the first seeks a new world order through political revolution, the latter through unlimited scientific progress, but both attempt to bring about heaven on earth by human efforts²⁵.

In contrast, for believers, human beings have dignity not only because they are bearers of the image of God, but because of the exalted state brought forth by Christ’s redemption and their eschatological destiny. As Benedict writes in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, the Christian understanding of hope is very different from technological hope. In the sphere of our ecological future, our hope must also be found in something greater than us:

[O]ur contemporary age has developed the hope of creating a perfect world that, thanks to scientific knowledge and to scientifically based politics, seemed to be achievable. Thus Biblical hope in the Kingdom of God has been displaced by hope in the kingdom of man, the hope of a better world which would be the real “Kingdom of God”. This seemed at last to be the great and realistic hope that man needs... But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can

bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope.²⁶

NOTE

¹ See VV. AA., *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, President's Council on Bioethics, Washington DC, 2008.

² See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Dignitas Personae* on certain bioethical questions, 2008.

³ See J. THAM, «Human Dignity in *Dignitas Personae*: Philosophical and Theological Reflections», in *Studia Bioethica* 2.1 (2009) 12-18.

⁴ See J. THAM, «Challenges to Human Dignity in the Ecology Movement», in *Linacre Quarterly* 77.1 (2010) 53-62.

⁵ See P. S. CHURCHLAND, «Human Dignity from a Neurophilosophical Perspective», in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 116.

⁶ See R. DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 2006³.

⁷ See R. P. KRAYNAK, «Human Dignity and the Mystery of the Human Soul», in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 63.

⁸ See J. THAM, «Will to Power: Nihilistic tendencies in reproductive technologies», in *The New Bioethics* Vol. 18 No. 2 (2013) 115-132; ID., «The Decline of Natural Law Reasoning: The Influence of Recent Cultural and Intellectual Currents on the Tradition», in *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 14.2 (2014) 245-255.

⁹ See P. SINGER, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*, New York review -Random House, New York, 1975.

¹⁰ See P. T. DE CHARDIN, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York 2008¹.

¹¹ These claims are often exaggerated and are not statistically accurate. See B. LOMBORG, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York, 2001¹.

¹² A. GREGG, «A Medical Aspect of the Population Problem», in *Science* 121 (1955) 682, cited in C. RUBIN,

«Human Dignity and the Future of Man», in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 162.

¹³ See PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971); PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, no. 451-487; BENEDICT XVI, *The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology*, Washington, CUA Press, 2014.

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51.

¹⁵ See J. HABERMAS, *The future of human nature*, Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2003.

¹⁶ See P. HAFFNER, *Towards a Theology of the Environment*, Gracewing, Leominster, 2008.

¹⁷ See INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html

¹⁸ See J. MOLTSMANN, *Creating a Just Future*, SCM Press, London-Philadelphia, 2012.

¹⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology*.

²⁰ BENEDICT XVI, General Audience of 26 August 2009. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090826_en.html

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, no. 38.

²² See PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, ed. UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, Città del Vaticano - Washington, DC, 2005¹, no. 461-465.

²³ See J. FLYNN, «God's Garden: Benedict XVI and a Human Ecology», ZENIT News Agency (June 08, 2014) <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/god-s-garden>.

²⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, no. 42.

²⁵ See J. THAM - M. LOSITO (eds.), *Bioetica al Futuro: Tecnologizzare l'uomo o Umanizzare la tecnica*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2010.

²⁶ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 2007, no. 30-31.