

The dignity of living forms

According to the theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1988), the dignity of living forms can be regarded as the expression of their intrinsic value. To say that all forms of life have value does not mean that they are all of equal value. It is therefore possible to reconcile the special value of human beings with the idea that all forms of life have dignity. Today an anthropocentrism which minimises the interdependence of all forms of life is clearly not widespread. But the anthropomorphic view that priority must be given to the preservation of balance in the biosphere for the sake of human beings is compatible with Christian belief.

This is certainly the view taken by Francis in the Encyclical ***Laudato Si***: the Pope criticizes deviant anthropocentrism and recognises that "it is not for our sake that other forms of life exist" (no.83), and he invites us to see the special role of humankind in Creation as being to care for our environment which we share with every form of life whose innate goodness we must respect. (No. 69).

Jewish and Christian thought introduces the idea of Creation *ex nihilo* and insists that the act of Creation inaugurated the concept of otherness. According to the Jewish Kabbalah [an ancient wisdom that reveals how the universe and life work], the *tsimtsum* is the withdrawal of God; God brought into existence a vacuum so that he could create something other than himself, his power took the form of self-limitation. At the same time God is present in the heart of Creation. God accompanies human kind and reveals himself as a Savior in the heart of the history of Israel, an event played out again in the history of humanity. This presence is manifested in Christian belief in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh (John 1); in several recent writings, the cosmic Christ described by St. Paul in the letter to the Ephesians, for example, is seen as the supreme form of the divine presence, both in the individual and in the universe. This presence which does not impose itself is paradoxical. It allows human beings to be autonomous with an immense responsibility for the rest of Creation, but at the same time giving them an ultimate objective: the Kingdom of God and a transfigured Creation. On this same theme, the theologian Karl Rahner speaks of the fundamental law that independence from and dependence on God merge to follow the same path.

This relationship with a God who offers himself and is sought throughout every element of Creation and in every action in the heart of the world is sometimes defined as panentheism, as opposed to pantheism: God is not Creation itself, but he is present throughout his Creation. This view is firmly held in The Orthodox Churches of the East; Maximus the Confessor writes of the divine energy in Creation, and Gregory Palamas in the 14th century writes of the doctrine of the innate energy within Creation (Egger 2012). Leonardo Boff has equally contributed to this perspective in Catholic theology which is inseparable from the recognition of the sacredness of the world, a view for which Jean de Peragame is well known, and which is also held by the Patriarch Bartholomew 1 today. Such stand-points are both theocentric and eco-centric.

Extract from 3 c 2 The Church's Social Teaching' by Cecile Renouard in 'Towards an Eco Assumption'