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## AN ANALYSIS OF THE MODERN CATHOLIC CHURCH APPROACH TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

**Beshenich C.**

The paper explores two perspectives of humanity's role on Earth. The author introduces the concept of biocentrism and determines why mankind's uniqueness charges it with the responsibility of protecting the environment, not only existing in it. The human being possesses the ability to establish moral norms, and thus should regard the environment as having the highest value, in spite of modern society's ever-increasing needs.

**Keywords:** ethics, environment, biocentrism, anthropocentrism, environmentalism, Catholicism.

## АНАЛИЗ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ПОДХОДА КАТОЛИЧЕСКОЙ ЦЕРКВИ К ПРОБЛЕМАМ ЭКОЛОГИИ

**Бешенич К.**

Статья раскрывает два взгляда на роль человечества на Земле. Автор рассматривает концепцию биоцентризма и определяет, почему уникальность человечества возлагает на него ответственность по защите окружающей среды, а не просто существование в ней. Человек обладает способностью устанавливать нормы морали и поэтому должен рассматривать окружающую среду как высшую ценность, несмотря на все возрастающие потребности современного общества.

**Ключевые слова:** этика, окружающая среда, биоцентризм, антропоцентризм, энвайронментализм, католицизм.

Within the realm of the animal kingdom, the human being is unique for possessing cognition. This cognition is seen in the "behavioural modernity", which the *Homo sapiens* species is believed to have formed 50,000 years ago and can be seen in such practices as "blade and microlithic technology, bone tools, increased

geographic range, specialized hunting, the use of aquatic resources, long distance trade, systematic processing and use of pigment, and art and decoration” [6, p. 453]. The focus of this paper is the modern human, whose behaviour includes specific psychological capacities allowing for planning, abstract thought, innovativeness, and symbolism. In defining the human being, it is useful to look at the anthropocentric school thought. The subject of this theory is the *Homo sapiens*. The species is believed to have been developing for the past 150,000 years. The beginning of this time is when it is supposed to have separated from the hominin line and begun its own species [11].

Anthropocentrism holds the human being in a place of predominant importance. The person is at the “centre” of the Earth’s function. The anthropocentric belief views the human as something which is separate from the rest of nature and ultimately superior to nature itself. Human life, in effect, is imbued with an intrinsic value that entitles it to exploit other members of the animal kingdom, as well as nature itself. The resources of nature, both animate and inanimate, are thus at the disposal of the human, for it to use as it sees fit. By holding such a place in the scheme of the world, the human being is absolved of responsibility towards the creatures of the Earth, as well as to the natural environment. Both exist to fulfil the needs of the human. To this end, they may be disposed of as necessary.

The possibility of so easily disposing of nature begs the question, how is the environment considered in relation to the person? Despite the belief held by many that nature was created for man, and the possibility of viewing nature as something existing for man, from the bio centric view, nature must be considered as holding “intrinsic value”. This indicates nature is the end in itself, rather than the means of another being’s (i.e., the human being) ends. Were nature of an “instrumental value”, it would simply be the means to achieving the self-fulfilling needs of the human race. The reality is that mankind needs Nature, and therefore exists in a relationship with it. Nature supports mankind, yet it does not play the role of the oppressed. Mankind owes its support to Nature as well. Such support should sustain Nature and allow for

it to replenish its resources via its natural processes, rather than plundering them until extinguished.

According to author Paul Taylor, there are two main types of ecosystems. The first one is that generally has remained untouched by people and has not been affected by their development. The author suggests “northern tundra, mountain forests, savannah grasslands” etc. as belonging to this category. The second one is that is currently untouched by humans but has been in some way affected by their presence. Areas, perhaps, that were once farmed or controlled in some way by people but are now inhabited by nature freely. In both ecosystems, the main trait is the lack of “human intervention” [13, p. 4].

Historically, mankind did have regard for Nature. The Agrarian Culture, which spanned from the times of Ancient Greece to the Renaissance, is a prime example of this. Farming was the predominant trade, and the human’s life depended on the environment for sustenance. Without assuming an idyllic stance, it is possible to say that mankind existed in harmony with Nature. His life depended on the environment, and therefore his work and existence supported the environment’s integrity.

The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century distorted the agrarian vision and placed Nature at the mercy of mankind. Through the development of technology and the rapid progress of ideas, man was given the power to exploit Nature and devastate it. The technology “involved the use of iron and steel, new energy sources including fuel and coal, and the invention of new machines to process these sources to increase production which then led to the development of factories to house the machines” [3]. The Second and Third Industrial Revolutions introduced increasingly more innovative methods of production that have allowed for the intense and expedient development of technology. As time has progressed since, the need for human principles that allows humans as moral agents to live in the world according to a right and good relation is necessary.

Human consideration toward the environment has, over time, led to the formulation of a new school of thought. Biocentrism emerged into philosophical thought in the first half of the 20th century. Biocentric authors have published in

defence of Nature and against mankind's reckless abuse of it. In the 20th century, Author Paul Taylor made a series of declarations in his book "Respect for Nature" which upheld the dignity of all living things and placed them within context to each other:

1. Humans are members of a community of life along with all other species, and on equal terms.

2. This community consists of a system of interdependence between all members, both physically, and in terms of relationships with other species.

3. Every organism is a "teleological centre of life", that is, each organism has a purpose and a reason for being, which is inherently "good" or "valuable".

4. Humans are not inherently superior to other species [13, p. 99].

The biocentric scientists of the 20th century formed a type of environmental ethics that classes humanity as just one of many created entities on the Earth and emphasized the dignity of the environment and the value which it possesses independently of mankind [2]. In affording such recognition to the environment, biocentrism holds mankind responsible for fulfilling four specific behaviours towards the environment: non-maleficence, non-interference, fidelity, and restitutive justice [4]. Each of these duties upholds the dignity of the natural environment and looks to protect it as much as possible from human-based harm.

Historically, ethics have often been anthropocentric. The 21st century has produced incredible technological advances, as well as intellectual progress. With this progress, the damage technology has made to the environment is visible, as well as the continued threat posed to the environment by mankind. Intellectual progress has particularly highlighted the role of the human person in harming the environment, as scientists continue to reveal the pressures imposed on the Earth by mankind's abusive behavioural patterns to the Earth. Continual usage of natural resources, the incredible waste of non-biodegradable materials, and the harmful outputs produced by industry demonstrate how humanity has continued to use the environment as a means to pursue its own pleasure. The effects of this usage are known to the human

intellect, and environmentalist ethics are required to propose a pattern of conduct for humans to restore respect to the environment in their daily lives and practices.

Environmentalist topics are not new to the modern Catholic Church. According to the Book of Genesis, God charged mankind with caring for the Earth. Therefore, environmentalist ethics examines the responsibilities of mankind concerning the environment, inquires as to the behaviours of mankind in relation to the environment, and looks at the culpability of mankind in connection with his actions towards the environment. The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church also discusses the environment, saying with regard to the problems existing in mankind's relationship with the environment that "...the underlying cause of these problems can be seen in man's pretension of exercising unconditional dominion over things, heedless of any moral considerations which, on the contrary, must distinguish all human activity" [10]. In this vein, contemporary philosopher Jakub Synowiec concisely connected man's very personhood with the environment by explaining that "Man is an exceptional being in nature, but this exceptional entity imposes on him more rights than the price" [12, s. 27-38].

The thinking of Pope Francis may be seen as a continuity of the thoughts held by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II, which both called on humanity to take responsibility for their actions. In his 1990 message for the World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II said that "there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations. I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue...I should like to address directly my brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church, in order to remind them of their serious obligation to care for all of creation" [8]. Pope John Paul II's words were a stark reminder for his audience. Mankind possesses a special dignity among all creatures on the Earth. And by virtue of this dignity, and thereby his very humanness, mankind is tasked with protecting and preserving the creation. These remarks are just one instance of the many times when Pope John Paul II called upon Catholics, as well as people in general, to care for the environment. He would address

the Church, governments, even organizations such as the United Nations in his entreaties to humanity to exercise its responsibility and care for the environment.

Pope Benedict continued the line of Pope John Paul II's thought. In his message for World Food Day, the Bavarian-born Pope who had a distinct love of nature said: "The order of creation demands that a priority be given to those human activities that do not cause irreversible damage to nature, but which instead are woven into the social, cultural, and religious fabric of the different communities. In this way, a sober balance is achieved between consumption and the sustainability of resources" [7]. In 2008, he would go on to say "...God's creation is one and it is good. The concerns for nonviolence, sustainable development, justice and peace, and care for our environment are of vital importance for humanity. They cannot, however, be understood apart from a profound reflection on the innate dignity of every human life from conception to natural death: a dignity conferred by God himself and thus inviolable" [1]. Again, the connection between humanity and the environment is made. And again, due to humanity's special dignity – given to it by God – it is emphasized that mankind is connected with the environment.

Pope Francis authored his encyclical *Laudato Si'* amidst the heightened importance of these questions [5]. His work emphasizes that issue of the global environment is an immediate concern for people- not fantasies produced by scientists. The encyclical discusses the role of mankind towards the environment. Mankind is itself a specific creature who is imbued with intrinsic dignity and effectively holds a privileged place in creation's hierarchy. Mankind and nature are directly connected, and therefore the condition of one affects the other.

Such interconnection is especially visible in the living conditions of the world's poor. An estimated 36% of the global population lives in extreme poverty [9]. Their lives are directly impacted by the environment. Exposure to the elements is a factor in the decrease of living standards. Jobs connected with agriculture are negatively impacted by climate conditions as global warming has pushed some areas into drought. In consideration of how the world's poor and environment are intimately connected, Pope Francis stated in *Laudato Si'*: "A true ecological

approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor” [5].

The world’s impoverished people lack the ability to make their voices known. Their intimate experience of poverty is overshadowed by politics. Their decreasing living standards are overlooked by the power relations connecting countries. *Laudato Si’* notes: “We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” [5]. The resolution to this crisis is an “integral ecology”, which the Pope envisions as connecting these human and environmental issues into one. From the starting point of this ecology, it would be possible to form an understanding of the human being as one which is ostensibly interconnected with an ecological culture that acts as “a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” [5].

Pope Francis’ words are profound reflections in contemporary times, but they are not new. His stance, similar to that held by his predecessors, recognizes humanity’s dignity. By virtue of this dignity, mankind is charged with protecting the natural environment, over which it has the ability to either dominate or protect. The protection and preservation of nature connects mankind as well, as by protecting nature, mankind is also protecting the world’s most vulnerable. Poverty and sustainability are interconnected as their effects threaten the poor and damage the environment. This thinking is present in Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis. But perhaps their importance is now more visible as humanity slowly recognizes the consequences of its actions.

The human being possesses the ability to establish moral systems, and as such should regard the environment as an entity that is the end in itself, rather than the means to achieving humanity’s ends. Anthropocentric thought views nature as existing for this being, whose natural superiority allows it to exploit Nature to fulfil its need and desires. Conversely, biocentric thought views the human being as existing in relation to nature and therefore not standing in domination over it. The

Catholic Church has, in its own way, emphasized the need for humans to respect nature through the teachings of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. After examining both of these viewpoints, this article analysed the Catholic Church's approach to the environment. It found that Pope Francis's current contributions to environmental thought, via *Laudato Si'*, have especially reinforced the connections which people share with nature, as well as with each other. Due to these connections, humanity bears a responsibility (that is intrinsic to its being) to care for one another and for nature. In consequence, melding the issues of poverty and ecology may be seen as one grave responsibility which reminds each person that they are, in a way, caretakers for all parts of God's creation.

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**Data about the author:**

Beshenich Caroline – Doctoral Candidate of Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University (Krakow, Poland).

**Сведения об авторе:**

Бешенич Каролина – докторант факультета международных и политических исследований Ягеллонского университета (Краков, Польша).

**E-mail:** karolina.besenic@gmail.com.