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UNIT 4. Assessment Component 1

Analyse the contribution of the biblical creation stories to the formulation of a positive environmental ethic

In the light of catastrophic events of an unprecedented scale occurring around the globe, small doubts are held about the idea that the modern ecological crisis is human-induced and that this represents the most formidable challenge humankind faces in the 21st century¹.

In recent decades, efforts from all disciplines have been trying to address this crisis. What concerns us here is the turning of the world religions into this matter, which is known as 'greening the world religions' (Taylor 2016: 293), and which respond to the efforts from different traditions on addressing the ecological crisis by rereading and reinterpreting their correspondent ancient texts, exploring the wisdom inherent in them that can bring more positive ecological understanding and practices (Taylor 2016). It was the interreligious meeting that happened at Assisi in 1986, organized by the WWF², that anticipated this emergence of the new academic field called Religion and Ecology (Gottlieb 2010; Tucker 2010).

In these pages we will focus on the contribution to these problems from the Christian tradition and scholars, in particular, from the biblical creation stories and its relationship to a possible positive environmental ethic inspired by them. For this, we will first revise the importance and influence of Christian tradition in the modern and current societies, and in particular, why the Bible's creation stories may contribute to affect a positive environmental attitude; following to review what the root texts of creation stories in the Genesis 1-2 said; to more thoroughly present the efforts from scholars and theologians on interfacing –both positively and negatively– these biblical texts with ecology and a concern with its crisis. Then we will conclude by considering the possible pragmatic responses that can be extracted from these analyses and academic efforts.

From Christian traditions, the efforts on addressing the ecological crisis have been focused especially on interpretations of the Bible; on how this can or cannot influence a positive environmental behaviour. Particularly, the creation stories within the Bible are seen as a major topic relating human relations with nature and other beings. Especially, since the contested article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' of Lynn White was published in 1967 in *Science* magazine, it has been argued and considered that 'modern science ultimately rests upon a foundation provided by the Bible' (Barr 1972: 10); therefore, Christianity has been accused of carrying the responsibility for the ecological disorders of modern societies

¹ A good summary of the vast number of literature detailing these facts is the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment report issued in March 2005 or Frederic Buell's *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

² See the declarations edited by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) at: http://www.arcworld.org/arc_and_the_faiths.asp

(White 1967). The focus of these accusations would mostly reside in the doctrine of creation in the Genesis story; when the separation between God and the created world is made, so 'nature is "de-divinized" and the world is demythologized, setting 'man over nature' and giving him 'authority to govern and control it' (Barr 1972: 10-11).

It is widely accepted that Christianity and the creation stories have played –and perhaps still play– a prominent role in the thinking of humanity –whether this has informed a responsible or an irresponsible attitude towards nature–. Thus, being a cultural source that has shaped the worldview of a vast number of people during centuries, the Bible has, at least, the potential to engage in the discourse and discussion of the ecological challenges humanity faces today. As Lynn White said, 'Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny –that is, by religion' (White 1967: 1205). Hence the fact that within the biblical creation stories there are symbols that can be used to inform our belief systems and therefore our actions.

In this way, the creation stories reflected in Genesis 1-2 have been used in numerous papers, articles and speeches, not only to discuss their responsibility for the current situation, but also to identify and relate to them as an example and inspiration of what can be a potential solution to the ecological crisis today.

Then, the question would be: what can the Bible's creation stories offer in the quest for solutions to the ecological crisis? Before approaching the possible interpretations to this question, let us briefly see what the text of Genesis 1-2 itself presents:

Genesis 1-2

The narrative in the first verses presents as a protagonist the figure of God and tells of a previous chaotic state before God's creation took place: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness' (Genesis 1:1; 1:2). As professor Kojo Okyere points out, that which has been created is presented with 'a sense of completeness', while the previous state of the earth is presented as 'a confused, unordered, formless chaos' (Okyere 2011: 3). God, with his creation, put order and created the world as we know it. J. R. Porter in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* defines it as 'the deity's victory over the forces of chaos, [...] as a result of which the god is established as a supreme king' (Porter 2004: 1).

The story continues with the creation's acts, which took place during seven days: six days of creation and one day of resting. First was the light in the first day (Genesis 1:3); the firmament, in the second day (Genesis 1:6-1:8); the sea, earth and plant life, in the third day (Genesis 1:9-1:13); the sun, the moon and the stars, on the fourth day (Genesis 1:14-1:19); all living creatures in the air and in the water were held on the fifth day (Genesis 1:20-1:23); and all living creatures in the earth and humans were created on the sixth day (Genesis 1:24-1:30); finally, God rests with satisfaction on his work on the seventh day, bringing the creation to an end (Genesis 2:1-2:3).

These episodes are presented directly by the speech of God, which directly 'transforms speech into reality' (Okyere 2011: 3), and the same order follows all different aspects of the creation:

'God spoke entities into being, assessed them, undertook some form of arrangement on the created entities, and named them' (Okyere 2011: 4). This structure of the narration reveals a progression framed in a temporal linearity: chaos turning into purposeful order, as well as 'the inherent similarity and connectivity which is linked through nature' (Okyere 2011: 4) of all creatures and creation.

However, the sixth day is narrated in a different manner, more extended and presenting the particularity of creating humans 'in our image, according to our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). This determines a special 'connection between God and humanity' (Okyere 2011: 5) and, furthermore, implies the blessing of God above humanity to 'subdue' and 'have dominion' over nature and the rest of creation (Genesis 1:28), which would have come into existence to provide 'a suitable agricultural environment for human beings' (Porter 2004: 2). Thus, 'Humanity receives the divine blessing and is given the role of God's vice-regent [...] to have dominion or control over the future course of the world' settles J. R. Porter (Porter 2004: 1).

Finally, the seventh day narrates the importance of the act of resting as significant as the other days, being the last event to bring the creation to completion and to an end, emphasizing 'the completeness and perfection of the created order' (Porter 2004: 1), which will give birth to the institutional principle of the Sabbath.

Lastly, professor Okyere remarks on the importance of the often repeated statement "*ki tobh*" (Genesis 1:4; 1:10; 1:12; 1:18; 1:21; 1:25), which means 'for it is good', after an act of creation is done; ending with "*tobh me'od*", 'very good' (Genesis 1:31), which refers to the whole creation (Okyere 2011: 5). This, for the author, represents the judgement of God as a 'divine assessment' of 'the inherent goodness of what he has created' as well as 'a stamp of authority' (Okyere 2011: 4). God expresses contentment with what he has created and establishes the 'futuristic implication' of the 'lifelong purpose of creation' as something that 'will be useful indefinitely' (Okyere 2011: 6).

Once we have seen a brief summary of the creation stories in the Bible and as mentioned above, there are many sources of literature that correlate symbols in the Genesis account with a positive belief and action towards an environmental concern. Those more often repeated and defended are:

- Since God's approach and care to the creation is holistic and not limited to humanity, humans inherit the purpose and responsibility of protecting and keeping the inherent order and beauty of God's whole work. 'Creation is seen as a gift by a God who knows what is good for God's own creatures and who grants these necessities for lives lived in flourishing ways' (Fretheim 2005: 32). Under this premise, DeWitt defends the whole Bible as 'a powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on earth' in his *Reading the Bible Through a Green Lens*; since this –the Bible– represents a call to us 'to bring honour to what is God's' creation (DeWitt 2008: 1). This is known as the 'human stewardship for creation' and leads us to the next argument defended.

- In the presentation of the inter-connectedness of everything created and at the same time the human distinctiveness made in the image and likeness of God, lies the responsibility in humanity to ensure the sustenance of what God has created (Genesis 1:28). 'God gave humans a special role and responsibility as stewards of his creation' (DeWitt 2008: 2). Where the world 'dominion' used in the mandate would be interpreted as a 'responsible stewardship', and from which furthermore derives the widespread debatable maxim of the anthropocentric view of humanity dominion over nature and other living beings that we will consider later on.
- Another characteristic defended is the forward-looking vision of the narrative defining an optimistic timeless future, which would contemplate the concern about the future earth we are leaving for future generations and species (Okyere 2011). However, this argument would present contradictions in later texts of the Bible and after the advent of Christ in the New Testament; especially in those apocalyptic and eschatological texts (e.g. Revelation 21, Isaiah 65:17; 66:22), where the idea of a new creation as a return to the beginning become fundamental after the 'creator's original intention' is 'frustrated by human sin and rebellion', and bringing the Earth to 'the end of time' (Porter 2004: 2).
- Also it has been defended the importance of rest that goes along with work in order to complete a task, which applies for creation and its sustenance and also to human beings and its survival (Okyere 2011). This is known as the 'Sabbath principle', and follows from God's command to set aside one day per week dedicated to the rest of animals, land and people (DeWitt 2008: 4). Being the purpose of this not only the rest but also the restoration. 'Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed' (Exodus 21:12).

On the other hand, the views of those who have been more critical on the interface between the creation account and of a positive environmental attitude often point at the special and superior role in which humans are presented in the creation stories. This would be the reason why humanities survival creates tension between the rest of creation. 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' (White 1967: 1205), anticipated Lynn White in his widely cited article.

As we have already mentioned, it is the mandate in Genesis 1:28 that has been the focus of the debate between: those who see the human role as the responsibility humans have within creation over nature and other beings, which is known as 'Christian environmental stewardship' (DeWitt 2008); and those who see it as the licence and right for the limitless use of nature for his own development³.

³ To see more literature about this debate on different interpretations and translations about the notions of 'stewardship' and 'dominion' see for example: the document from the International Theological Commission 2002, Barr 1972, Habel 2009, Rogerson 2010 or Bauckham 2010.

In light of recent history and the current situation, it is obvious that the responsibility of humanity hasn't been taken seriously at all –if this was what the biblical scriptures meant–; rather it looks more like the opposite. The reply given to this by DeWitt: 'But often we just don't do many of the things we know we should do' (DeWitt 2008: 1), would leave a lot to be desired in the moral ethics field.

Not only accused of offering an anthropocentric view, the notion of dominion presented in Genesis 1-2 is also appointed for diverse authors to represent the special and superior position of male in a patriarchal society, which can be derived from the fact that 'woman is created secondarily from man' (Porter 2004: 2); along with the emphasis on 'the unity of the sexes and their mutual, complimentary need' presented in what will later be the institution of marriage (Porter 2004: 2).

In any case, the arguments on whether the creation stories mean one thing or another, or to get caught up in defending one possible translation of the Hebrew words used rather than another, completely misses the point of addressing the current ecological crisis and finding solutions to it. The motivation that should be reflected upon or discussed is whether the influence of the divine can contribute to the solution in ensuring the safety of the world and the life of its beings, and how we can do this.

Can these positive readings of the creation stories really motivate attitudes towards pragmatic responses to the critical situation we are in? Is it really by putting ourselves – humans– in the central and fundamental role for the sustenance of the world again –which is deducible from God's mandates in the creation– that will generate valid solutions and pragmatic attitudes? Or will this always generate more problems within the solutions? Isn't it this 'ambition to be like God' that has, and still do, subordinated nature and women within the process (Mellor 1997)?

In summary, the accounts in Genesis 1-2 are the starting point of the history that follows in the Bible. In them is presented a 'comprehensive world order' (Porter 2004: 2) that has shaped worldviews, literature, beliefs and attitudes over the centuries. Therefore the attention directed to them in order to understand human behaviour is justified. A different thing would be to say that the scholarly discussions on interpreting the texts in one way or another brings attitudinal changes in the life of Christian practitioners and believers. Which, moreover, is difficult to contrast in the light that it seems that the Bible, along with other ancient texts, can be interpreted under the wish of whoever reads them, and not only that; it also being possible that these texts may have influence on shaping worldviews not through their own "original meaning" but through the interpretation which have been placed upon them.

Therefore, under an honest concern before our current critical ecological situation, the efforts have to be addressed in a different manner. Lynn White asserted: 'since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not' (White 1967: 1207). As the work of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim have

been pointing out, this places the debate in the view that moral values have to be definitely considered as effective as the economical, political and educational vigour (Tucker 2010). Being the nature of the ecological crisis intrinsically multifaceted, and having at its core the existential crisis, 'the 'New Ecumenical, Religious Movement' (Taylor 2016a: 292) has been offering and stressing 'the spiritual value of nature, our kinship with the nonhuman, and our ethical responsibilities to the earth' (Gotllieb 2010: 7). 'New concepts of the divine, holiness, spiritual life, and sin are being forged' (Gotllieb 2010: 7), which leads religious movements and people to be aware and pragmatically committed to the problems the world faces today.

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