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O beauty, O world drunk with eternal love and life!

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O Schönheit! O ewigen Liebens,
Lebens trunk'ne Welt!

O beauty, O world drunk with
eternal love and life!

These words that Mahler added to the text of the last movement of *Das Lied von der Erde* (1907–1909) arguably sum up the whole spirit of the work. They are fundamental concepts shaping the structure of the composition.

First, *beauty*. According to Prince Myshkin's celebrated claim in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, "Beauty will save the world." But beauty, if separated from good and truth would, to use Dostoevsky's words again, this time pronounced by Dmitri Karamazov, be "terrible because it has not been fathomed and never can be fathomed, for God sets us nothing but riddles... The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man." And yet, as the great St. Augustine asks, significantly in *De musica*: "Tell me, I beg you, what else can one love if not beautiful things?"

The second key concept in Mahler's phrase is the *world*, seen as the whole of reality. In this connection his reference to *drunkenness* requires close scrutiny. It is not meant as an allusion to the "third eye of the poet" pointing the way to other worlds, which the so-called *poètes maudits* in late 19th-century Paris (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé...) sought by drinking absinthe. It is an opening up to fullness, overabundance, and even the *longing for*. This brings us to *love*, the power which according to Dante "moves the sun and the stars," and often becomes a solace in life.

And lastly, *life* and *eternity*. Both because life is unquenchable thirst for eternity and because in every life there is something eternal.

Like all musical geniuses, Mahler alludes to an irreducible state of affairs. Reality speaks to man, and man is able to take in reality. Indeed, there may well be an intimate correspondence between the two.

Taking in the real

But where does the possibility of the relationship between man and the outside world come from? Is this relationship the involvement—albeit at qualitatively different levels—of all beings in a single nature, or the relationship that both have with a Creator?

Before attempting to answer this question, we must mention an important factor. Although the question concerning the relationship between man and the world is as old as humanity itself, today it has taken on an urgent new relevance. Unlike what happened up to the age of Kant, it now seems inconceivable that anthropological and ethical questions might come from cosmology. Considerations about the Earth no longer provide a picture in which man must find a place (anthropology); nor do they constitute an example to be imitated, or to which man must or can submit in some way. Man now appears literally to be *im-mondo* (“not of the world” or “unclean” and excluded from the sacred). The Earth often appears only to be a kind of inconsequential ornament. People confidently go about their affairs, but these affairs owe nothing at all to the cosmos. They are extraneous to it:

But what we no longer know is whether or why it is morally good that there are men in the world; and, for example, why it is good that there continue to be men: is their existence worth the sacrifices it entails—for the biosphere, for their relatives, indeed, for themselves?[i]

Precisely on these grounds, deciding what kind of relationship man has with the Earth is an urgent, crucial issue.

Man and the Earth

An initial suggestion comes from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople:

It is a fact that the term ‘environment’ presupposes someone encompassed by it. The two realities involved include, on the one hand, human beings as the ones encompassed, and, on the other hand, the natural creation as the one that encompasses...we must clearly retain this distinction between nature as constituting the environment and humanity as encompassed by it.[ii]

Besides providing an essential initial description of the relationship between man and the environment, Bartholomew’s remarks illustrate how this relationship belongs to the shared experience of life. Man experiences a living exchange with the created world and at the same time cannot avoid wondering about the meaning of being immersed in nature: where is that experience grounded?

In the Bible the environment in which man is created is represented by the figure of a garden (the Greek *parádeisos*), a place of beauty in which man’s constituent relations—with self, with God, and all other living beings—are harmonious. Moreover, the “environment” itself has been created for man, who is called on to cultivate and care for it (Gen 2:15). He is also given the task of naming the living creatures (Gen 2:19).

Starting from theological thinking about creation, we realize how God’s creative action is manifested not only in making the world exist, but also in making human beings free and therefore responsible for the whole of creation. The narrative of the Fall of man and woman is meant to signify that from the first instant of creation, our freedom is at stake. We cannot think of man separately from his freedom. And the Earth exists for man so much that the Church identifies the root of the environmental issue in original sin. Pope John Paul II described the issue in exquisitely anthropological terms:

In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the

earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and, in a certain sense, create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the Earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though the Earth did not have its own requisites and a prior God given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of the creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.[iiii]

This is why, as Revelation still teaches us, the man-environment relation must be seen from the point of view of Redemption.

New creation

Christ's resurrection ushers in a new stage in which the relationship between man and creation is set under the sign of birth or "labour," which is painful but positive because intended for the good in life. And this is above all anthropological labour, which affects however, as St. Paul points out, the whole of creation:

For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labour pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. (Rom 8:19-24)

In this way anthropological labour and cosmological labour are interlocked in the ineluctable eschatological perspective. Thus in the second coming—already initiated on the path of the human family—what is already complete in Christ will be completed in us and in the world through the resurrection of our mortal body in our true body, in *the new heavens and the new Earth*. According to the Christian point of view, in this light we can look at the first creation and the new creation not as two separate realities which succeed each other mechanically, but as two moments which reciprocally embrace each other. The second assumes the first and gives its full meaning. The first would inevitably remain incomplete and not adequately intelligible without the other. Moreover, the historic-salvific path develops according to a plan conceived "*before the foundation of the world*" (Eph 1:4), which will be realized in "*the fullness of time*" (Eph 1:10). With the new creation, Christ is revealed as the Head of creation itself.

Why did God create man and the world when he has no need of them? This question can be couched in metaphysical terms as: *Why is there being rather than nothingness?* The best answer we can give is that creation is the gift that God makes of himself. Through it, he freely brings into being and maintains creatures in life, who, although radically distinct from him, bear his indelible mark.

Two reductive versions of the man-nature relationship

This vision of existence enables us to eschew two inadequate conceptions—inadequate because basically incapable of fully accounting for human experience—of the man-environment relationship.

On one hand, an extreme anthropocentrism, whereby man is the absolute master of the cosmos. We know that some ecological thinkers base this line of reasoning on the precedence that the Bible accords to man over the created world. The argument comes from the first version of the Genesis narrative of creation, which takes the form of an order given to man: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth” (Gen 1:28).

Without entering into a detailed reply to this critique, we can simply refer to the “second narrative” of creation, in which the Biblical teaching is formulated as follows: “The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it” (Gen 2:15). Here there are not only two protagonists in the man-creation relationship—the human community and creation—but three, given that the relationship originates with the Creator. This leads to a further consideration. If man cannot rise to be the omnipotent master of the cosmos, he should not delude himself that he can save it from disaster through his own efforts, even by resorting to the remarkable discoveries and applications of science and technology.

Moreover, this prevents us from naively accepting a biocentrism or ecocentrism which sets out to “eliminate the ontological and axiological difference between man and other living beings, since the biosphere is considered a biotic unity with undifferentiated value”—so that “man’s superior responsibility can be eliminated in favour of an egalitarian consideration of the ‘dignity’ of all living beings.”^[iv] But this view devalues both man, who is ultimately denied the status of a free agent participating in the activities of the Creator, and the Earth, which is stripped of all purpose except survival. In fact, as Pope Benedict XVI writes: “Human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense.”^[v]

If the cosmos is reduced to nature in which we are absorbed, our relationship with it can at most be aesthetical; it cannot be ethical (Kierkegaard). Nature, however, is not only “a set of ‘things’ but also of ‘meanings,’”^[vi] through which human freedom is called to realize its own original vocation in searching for the face of the Creator.

Environmental conflicts as an anthropological issue

After this brief survey of the Christian vision of the relationship between man and creation, we may ask if and how this conception, and similarly those of the other great religions, can contribute to solving the current intense ecological conflicts. Are religions, as demonstrated by their influence in other fields in the past, able to mobilize the energies required for a thorough-going ecological conversion? After all, this would need billions of people to change their outlook. Can religious passions bring this about? This question contains a fairly overt invitation to frame in a radically new way the relationship between *eco-logy* and *theo-logy* in order to tackle openly the internal conflicts in these two worlds. I will only make a generic kind of suggestion.

I do not wish to go into the debate on the concept of nature. Almost everyone, in both the scientific and theological fields, seems to believe nature is doomed and considers this situation to be responsible for almost all the ills afflicting humanity. Personally, I believe that since *something given is always given to someone*, an ultimate ineffable element is ineliminable. And from Aristotle on, what has *physis* been, if

not this multiple, dynamic *actuality*?

But we must bear in mind, and especially as far as Christianity is concerned, that we cannot speak of nature other than in the terms of creation. And it is effective thinking on creation that paves the way to reconsidering the relationship between ecology and theology. Creation brings the *relationship* into the picture. Post-modern man is faced with a painful alternative. Having left behind the age of utopias and the pitch darkness it cast on the last century, post-modern anthropology has taken on a strongly Pascalian character. It is pursuing the meaningful wager of a radical alternative: does third-millennium man only wish to be the *experiment of himself* or does he wish to be a *self-in-relation*?

To face up to this challenge, anthropology must be dramatic. It must accept that the insuperable *one*, of which the self consists, is always present in a *twofold* way. I am one, that is why I can say “I,” but I am always one of two: one of body-soul; one of man-woman; one of individual-community, and one of man-cosmos. Hence otherness makes “me” an internal dimension of self, which on these grounds cannot exist other than in a relationship. It is the self which openly demonstrates this dramatic or polarized character. This is why the correct way of referring to the self is as the *self-in-relation*.

The interlocking of constituent polarities reveals the authentic relationship of creation as the permanent loving relationship with the One who summons into being all reality (cf. Rom 1:20) and continues to accompany it. According to the Jewish and Christian traditions, God made the relationship of love the reason for his compromise with the human family throughout its history. For the Jewish people and for Christians, he is *God with us*, and the *us* brings into play all the constituent polarities-relationships that I have just mentioned. Acknowledging the ever-polar relationship of self with oneself, with others, with the cosmos, and with God is the only way we can say “I” in a humanly satisfactory way.

We inevitably see in this perspective the urgent task of inscribing the good relationship with creation within the intersecting circles of other constituent relations.

Conclusion

I realize that what I am suggesting is too general not to run the risk of being obvious. But I feel it does show that there is a bridge between ecology and theology. And the more judicious scientists are also building this bridge today, having abandoned an ecologist vulgate based on a mythical return to a good and innocent nature. Baudelaire’s exclamation, “Pan has come back!,” is empty. The way forward for the urgent, collaborative convergence between ecology and theology is to continue the logic of creation with love. This logic is scientific, religious, and political all in one. And consequently it is the logic of justice and of the complete development of humanity (the theme of *Caritas in Veritate*).

Religions can have something important to say on environmental issues when they are expressed through individual and social players willing to narrate the fullness of human experience and committed to putting forward valid arguments on its behalf. Mahler himself bears witness to this when he says: “My heart is eternally devoured by a torment: my immense yearning for you.”^[vii] Or when he feels he is prey to the questions that inexorably arise from experience common to all people:

Where have we come from? Where are we going to? Is it true, as Schopenhauer says, that I really desired to live before being conceived? If I was created free, why does my personality imprison me? What is all this suffering for? How can cruelty and evil be the work of a merciful God? In the end,

will death reveal the meaning of life to us?[viii]

As he was to tell his faithful disciple, Bruno Walter, on looking back on life when death already had a hand on his shoulder:

There are many—too many—things that I could say about myself; I cannot even begin. I’ve suffered so much in these last eighteen months [after his daughter’s death and his own illness] that I can barely tell you about them. How could I try and describe such a terrible crisis? I see everything in a completely new light; I have undergone such an incredible transformation that it wouldn’t surprise me to find myself in a new body (like Faust in the last scene). I’m more eager than ever to live and I find ‘the habit of living’ sweeter than ever.

He ends with a magnificent and particularly meaningful statement: “It is strange that when I hear music, even when I myself am conducting, I find very precise replies to all my questions and everything is perfectly clear and obvious to me. Or rather, what I feel that I perceive with such clarity is that they are not questions at all.”[ix]

In short, after so many thoughts, desires and struggles, Mahler finds true solace for his suffering in music—a real opening to the Mystery. The realm of music is very close to that of faith.

It is an opening inviting us to appreciate the Mystery of creation as a whole.

[i] Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 218.

[ii] Bartholomew I in N. Ascherson and A. Marshall (eds.), *The Adriatic Sea: A Sea at Risk, a Unity of Purpose, Religion, Science and the Environment* (Athens, 2003).

[iii] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), no. 37.

[iv] John Paul II, *Address to Conference on Environment and Health*, 24 March 1997, no. 5.

[v] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no. 48.

[vi] Cf. A. Scola, *Buone ragioni per la vita in comune: Religione, politica, economia* (Mondadori, 2010).

[vii] A. Liberman, *Gustav Mahler o el corazón abrumado* (Altalena Editores, 1986), 16.

[viii] B. Walter, *Gustav Mahler* (Editori Riuniti, 1981).

[ix] *Ibid.*

Cardinal Angelo Scola was the Patriarch of Venice before he was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as the Archbishop of Milan in 2011.

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