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Welcome as guests on earth!

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# Chapter 1

## Welcome as Guests on Earth! Eco-Theology, Eco-Spirituality, and Eco-Ethics

What is the position and task of human beings in the whole of creation? The answer to this basic anthropological question is the key to Christian and interreligious environmental ethics.

### 1.1. Major Concepts for Man's Role on Earth

Four major types of relationship between human and non-human beings are described in environmental ethics: (1) *Anthropo-centric Concept*: human being is the ethical reference point; (2) *Bio-centric Concept*: all life (non-human and human) is the ethical reference point; (3) *Patho-centric Concept*: the suffering of beings is the ethical reference point; and (4) *Theo-centric Concept*: the perspective and will of God (*theos*) is the ethical reference point.

In the history of humankind and in the different cultures, different anthropologies dominated and competed with each other. What is the position of a human being in the whole of creation? Some of the alternatives may be listed as follows: (1) *A king?* As an arbitrary dictator, free to treat nature as

property or as a good king to serve and conserve? (2) *A worm?* Is a human being not more than any other being? (3) *A steward?* Called to care for creation? (4) *A manager?* Managing the Earth in a technocratic way? (5) *A Killer?* Struggle for the survival of the fittest (Darwin)?

## 1.2. Welcome as Guests on Earth

My proposal for the anthropological foundation of environmental ethics is the image that human beings are guests on earth. Indeed, they are welcome as such! “I am a guest on earth, we all together are guests on earth” means that, as Indians, Asians and Europeans, as Americans and Africans, as rich and poor, as socialists and capitalists, as Hindu, Christians, Buddhists and Muslim, we all are guests on earth. The wonderful natural resources are not our personal possession. They do not belong to us, but they are the common good of humanity, given by the creator to us as His guests for careful use and for future generations. This anthropology is common to all Christian confessions. Pope Benedict XVI, in his latest Encyclical “*Caritas in Veritate*,” expresses it as follows: “Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life.”<sup>1</sup> The same is said in many ecumenical statements of Churches, e.g., on climate justice.

“To be a guest on earth” is an anthropology which is deeply rooted in many religious traditions and many cultures. In the biblical books, it is linked to God the creator and human beings as his creation with a specific offer and

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclical Letter “*Caritas in veritate*” of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, 2009, §48.

responsibility. “To be a guest” is a paradigm from the creation story up to Christology and Eschatology.

The message “Bring the earth under your control” (Gen 1:28) in the younger of the two biblical histories of creation, written in the Babylonian exile 2500 years ago, is well known and often misunderstood as an oppressive position of power of man over nature and is thus rejected. However, this “*dominium terrae*” is by no means an invitation to the unlimited exploitation of nature. On the contrary, it means that we have responsibility for our environment in the same way as a good king should feel responsible towards his people or as a good steward who takes care of the goods that he has been entrusted with. The older biblical history of creation shows God’s generosity of allowing humanity to live on earth like in a fertile garden but combines it with the command “to cultivate and to guard it”<sup>2</sup> and “to work on it and to take care of it”<sup>3</sup> (Gen 2:15). God’s invitation and limitation “to cultivate and to conserve” is the shortest and oldest definition of sustainability I found!

God’s message to the humankind – to be respectful to creation – is not only understood from the biblical creation stories. The position of the humans is defined by the eschatological goal of creation: At the end of time and already in these times, God invites to the great banquet. He offers the abundant creation to his guests and lets them partake in the completion of creation. The humankind can only respond to this promise and this offer in the most

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<sup>2</sup> English Bible, Good News Bible, Bible Society of India, Bangalore.

<sup>3</sup> English Bible, New International Version.

appropriate way by showing joy, praise, and thanks. At the same time, this offer represents the foundations of the ethical re-orientation: Because humanity has experienced God's promise it is possible to live on earth like a respectful guest. God himself is host. It is he who prepares the banquet (Is 25:6-8). The laid table is creation in perfection. And it is not up to the guest to choose his or her host, but the host invites his guests as his friends (Jn 15:16).

In the eschatological reconciliation, the mutual hospitality of all creatures becomes perfect: "Wolves will be the guests of sheep" (Is 11:6)! This means that to be God's guest and host of fellow-humans and fellow-creatures is a basic attitude including even the world of non-humans!

The eschatological orientation has to be closely linked to liberation story of the exodus: Guests and hospitality play an essential role in the biblical tradition as well as in many other cultures. In the Old Testament, the respect of foreigners and guests is based upon the memory of the people of Israel in Egypt. "My people went to live in Egypt as foreigners" (Is 52:4). Yet, "do not despise the Egyptians; you once lived in their land" (Deut 23:7; similar, Ex 22:21; Lev 19:34; Deut 24:18). After exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel experienced in the Babylonian exile for the second time what it meant to be foreigners. The attitude – that one's own life as well as the earth and its resources are not our property but only a loan – is closely connected to this (1 Chr 29:1). In ecological terms, psalm 24 is also significant: "The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his" (Ps 24:1). Thus, humans have no right of disposal, but a right of use

upon the resources of this earth. Liberation from slavery and oppression and living as a guest belong together. In biblical perspectives, *eco-theology and liberation theology* are two sides of the same coin.<sup>4</sup>

“I am a guest on earth for just a little while” (Ps 119:19) does not mean to long for the beyond while withdrawing from this world, but to enter the pilgrimage on earth in joyful expectation of God’s kingdom to come and in deep respect towards creation knowing that we cannot possess it. He who behaves like a true guest leaves the guesthouse behind in good order for the next guests that will arrive after him/her.

In the gospel books, hospitality plays an eminent role. In particular, in the gospel according to Luke, one can truly speak about a theology of being guests.

The table community with guests is the embodiment of hospitality and the anticipation of the eschatological reconciliation – again in particular in the gospel books and with Jesus. The Eucharistic community is an expression of God’s hospitality and, thus, the visible banquet community of the guests that have been invited by God himself (1 Cor 10:16-18); Mk 14:22). The most important feature of the guests that are partaking in the banquet community is the sharing. Thus, the Eucharist turns into the starting point of the worldwide sharing among guests including fellow-

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George Mathew Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation: Towards an Integral Ecotheology*, New Delhi: ISPCK/NCCI, 1999; Leonardo Boff, *Zärtlichkeit und Kraft: Franz von Assisi mit den Augen der Armen gesehen*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1983.

beings and the environment. Christian eco-spirituality starts at the table of the Lord! It starts with God's invitation to all – independent from confession – to become his guest. Finally, the Judeo-Christian image of the humankind describes man to be God's guest and as such at the same time also the host of his fellow-beings and the world around him.

Everything that has been created is placed at the guest's disposal, although none of that can be possessed by the guest. Hence, it follows that things which are on loan are treated with care and respect and a sense of sustainability. Every intervention into the 'goods on loan' has to be done with greatest caution and only on consultation with the host, which results in a 'guest-politics' and a 'guest-economy'.

To be guest means to be protected by the host and feel secure with him. At the same time, it means to see the life span on this earth not as the ultimate but as the penultimate goal. The expectation of the coming kingdom of God thoroughly marks life in this world. The hope for another, eternal home leads to calmness and composure, overcoming greed, as it is no longer necessary to get hold of the fortunes of this world.

In the same way as God is not only host but also guest himself (and a foreigner! Jn 1:11; Mt 8:20), man is not only guest but commissioned by God to take over the tasks of a host. At least from the eschatological perspective not only all fellow-humans but also all fellow-creatures have to be considered as guests. Hence, from our ethics of being guests follows the respect of the value and dignity of all creatures. To be host, thus, also corresponds to the '*diakonos*' of the

New Testament, who serves the guests unselfishly for example at the banquet community. In management terms, it is called servant leadership and good, accountable stewardship. Being host leads to charitable service, to careful use of resources, to diaconal service for human and non-human beings. There is a close connection between the duties of the host towards his guests and the poor, in Hebrew the *anawim*, in India people like the Dalits and all those without power and rights, who may claim particular respect and protection.

From this starting point of being guest on earth, the double mission of human beings in the two biblical creation stories appears in a new light. “Bring the earth under your control” (Gen 1:28) means to behave even as a king like a guest! What should be brought under control in the dominium are not living creatures but the earth; consequently, it means the cultivation of the soil. Christian supports technology and science as far as they are means to cultivate, which means to feed people and improve life in dignity for all. The ‘*dominium terrae*’ is replaced by the ‘*servicium terrae*’, i.e., serving the earth.

This *Eco-Theology of Being Guest* can be summarized with the following key elements.

### **1.2.1. *Eco-Theology: God as Owner of the Guesthouse and Host***

- God the creator is the owner of the earth: “The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth (*oikumene*) and all who live on it are his” (Ps 24:1). God offers the Earth as his guesthouse. He himself is

the host.

- Human beings together with all non-human creatures (!) are no longer enemies on earth, but invited and welcomed as guests.
- God through Jesus Christ invites all people to be his guests and friends, to sit at his table and to build one community (humankind).

### **1.2.2. *Eco-Anthropology: Human Beings Are Invited Guests***

- The earth is the common guesthouse, given to all living beings in order to live with dignity.
- Guests are invited to enjoy the gifts in the guesthouse and to use them carefully.
- Guests are asked to respect the rules and obligations in the guesthouse.
- Guests should leave the guesthouse in a way that the next guests (future generations) can enjoy the same or similar gifts.
- The guests borrow (rent) the guesthouse, they are not the proprietors!
- One can only be guest in relation to a host or a hostess. Therefore, man cannot determine his being a guest out of himself, but it has been given to him by God's covenant with the people.

### **1.2.3. *Eco-Spirituality: Celebrating the Caring and Just God***

- Being grateful for the abundant life that God offers to all beings leads to a lifelong act of celebrating God for His justice and His care.
- Celebrating the beauty of creation as the image of the beauty of the triune God.
- Celebrating God's (eco-) justice in the midst of injustice, praising the Cosmic Christ as the ever-present healing, reconciling and caring energy which enables and empowers human beings to care for God's creation.
- "Conversion from callous tearing of whatever we want from the earth to a mutual partnership and sharing"<sup>5</sup> of its fruits.

### **1.2.4. *Eco-Ethics: Acting as Responsible Guests and 'Careholders'***

- The Earth is not the possession of individuals, communities, or nations. The earth is the common house of humankind ('eco' comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'house'). Human responsibility in this common house has the following three dimensions.

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<sup>5</sup> Koshy Punnackadu, Mathew, *Eco-Spirituality*, CSI Life, Magazine of the Church of South India, (9), 08, Aug 2010, 14-17 (14). The author is environmental scientist and Convener of the CSI Synod Ecological Concerns Committee.

- *Economy* (from *oikos* and *nomos*, meaning the rules in the household): responsible production of goods and services. ‘Guest-politics’ and ‘guest-economy’ are based on an attitude which uses everything as an entrusted loan and not as a possession.
- *Ecology* (from *oikos* and *logia*, meaning the study of the living in the household): responsible use of natural resources and a cohabitation of all beings in their ecosystems so that future guests can use them as well.
- *Ecumenism* (from *oikumene*, meaning the whole inhabited earth): responsible community of different religions and worldviews as interreligious community cares for creation.

All these three dimensions belong together and are *interdependent*. Economy can be sustainable only on a long term protection of the environment. The economy and the ecology will be sustainable only if people with different religious convictions learn to live together in mutual respect and peace, recognizing that all are invited as guests on earth with the same rights and obligations in this wonderful guesthouse called earth.

### **1.3. From Shareholder to ‘Careholder’**

Within the family of guests, there are different roles and tasks. A special responsibility<sup>6</sup> is entrusted with the manager

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<sup>6</sup> See more in Stückelberger, Christoph/ Mugambi, J.N.K (eds.): *Responsible Leadership. Global and Contextual Perspectives*, Globethics.net

who manages the guesthouse on behalf of the owner. In biblical terms, it is the good steward who is described as the good manager. Its clearest expression is found in Luke 12:42-48:

42 Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. 44 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. 45 But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming’ and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, 46 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful... 48 Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.

The *oikonomos* is housekeeper who keeps the house in order. It is the one who is the administrator and manager who has to care for the economy of the household and for all people living and working in this community. It is the first servant. There are four characteristics in the text which distinguish the responsible and the irresponsible manager.

Firstly, the good manager recognizes that he is not the proprietor of the house or the shareholder of the company but responsible to maintain and develop it in the name of the owner. The bad manager behaves as if he is the owner and

sees the house, the earth and its resources or the company as his/her own property.

Secondly, the faithful steward cares for the people under his/her responsibility! He/she gives food, salary and social security at the proper time (v. 42). But the bad leader violates and exploits the people he should be responsible for (v. 45).

Thirdly, the good leader represents a solid work ethic. He/she works hard for the wellbeing of the collaborators and, therefore, serves as a good example. The irresponsible leader does not work, is corrupt, drunken (that means he is greedy and hooked on all kind of things). His exploitation and slavery are the expressions that he regards not only the household but also human beings as his personal property.

Finally, the wise servant acts in a responsible and accountable way at every moment of his/her life because he/she knows that the ‘master’ could come and control every time. Business ethics and response to God are fully integrated in the daily life. But the stupid manager believes that no control will happen, that he can win every court case by bribing the judges, and that it is enough to go to church and begin to pray just at the end of life in order to be saved.<sup>7</sup>

The story shows in a very simple and convincing way the meaning of responsibility: it means to respond to somebody

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<sup>7</sup> For responsible, corruption-free management of resources, see Christoph Stückelberger, *Corruption-Free Churches Are Possible: Experiences, Values, Solutions*, Globethics.net Series No. 3, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2010. Download for free from October 2010 from [www.globethics.net/web/guest/library](http://www.globethics.net/web/guest/library).

(the word ‘responsibility’ comes from ‘response’): the manager to the owner, the Christian to God. A bad leader wants to be autonomous, that means ‘independent’ from all responsibility towards others except oneself. And by that, as a drunken person, the manager loses control over himself/herself. He is controlled by his greed for mammon and power. The good steward is *theonomous*, which means that he gets his responsibility, respect, and dignity from his dependency on God. The more responsible he acts the more responsibilities he gets and can manage (v. 48).

This responsible behaviour is a vision for everybody, but especially the leaders. This model is convincing because it is not only a theory but a model practised by Jesus himself in his life as a ‘serving king’, offering his own life for the benefit and salvation of the whole community. He preached, healed, danced and laughed, constantly responding to the needs of his ‘clients’ as his ‘work ethics’. He served as a servant washing the feet of his disciples, he gave orientation and guidelines by his challenging parables, and he shared his food with many. He remained faithful to God whom he called father, even on the cross. The disciples of the resurrected Christ are invited to become such good stewards of God’s gifts.

Acting as a careholder includes non-violent caring for human and non-human beings. St. Paul’s vision of the *Cosmic Christ* (Col 1:15-20; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Eph 1:3-10) means that violence against nature leads to the “Wounded Cosmic Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Christians do not respect the Cosmic Christ

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Benny Nalkara, “Pauline Cosmic Christology and Indian Eco-

if they violate his body with environmental destruction.

The two models of the faithful steward and the thankful guest can also be summarized in the word ‘careholder’. The shareholder holds shares and, therefore, possesses a part of a company in order to make profit out of his invested money. The responsible shareholder, in addition, cares for the wellbeing of the company and its resources, including the workers. The responsible leader as a ‘careholder’ holds responsibility and cares for values, goods, and for people who are entrusted to him or her. Responsible behaviour and its virtues are first of all valid for all human beings. Leaders ‘only’ have a higher degree of responsibility to care than the ‘ordinary’ people. The stronger has more responsibilities than the weaker because he has more power, competences, and means to decide and to act.

The steward and ‘careholder’ can be characterized by six virtues.

1. *To care*: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). The shareholder cultivates and conserves, transforms, and protects and finds the right balance between the two. To care for others as for oneself is a direct expression of the commandment to love the other as oneself. To care does not primarily mean charity, but to care for a life in dignity of all, to strengthen justice, and to develop technological skills and political

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Spirituality” in *New Horizons of Indian Christian Living*, ed. Saju Chackalackal, 253-270, Bengaluru: Vidyavanam Publications, 2009, 264-266. The author shows that the Pauline Christology of the Cosmic Christ is central to Christian eco-spirituality and ethics.

mechanisms for the wellbeing of the individuals as well as the community. To care includes being attentive, present, near to those for whom the leader has to care. The primary obligation is to care for food and water as the first human right and as the pre-condition for all other rights.

2. *To protect*: The steward is among others the watchman who recognizes coming dangers, who takes protecting measures in advance, who intervenes in order to avoid damage and who – if a problem or a catastrophe could not be avoided – helps to restore and to heal the wounds. The good leader has an obligation to protect. That is valid for the leader as an individual as for institutional leaders such as a governments or a multilateral institution like the UN.<sup>9</sup>
3. *To guide*: The steward is the pathfinder and shows the direction. He reminds the subordinate that altogether they are not owners and to respond in their behaviour to the owner's – the Creator's – expectations. His or her guidance is based on values, filled with knowledge and knowhow. She/he has the skill to think ahead and to be in planning and vision always a step ahead of the others.
4. *To order*: To guide means also to bring an order and structure into unclear situations and confusing structures, to restructure where necessary in order to strengthen the strategy, the community, the efficiency and sustainability

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<sup>9</sup> ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, Ottawa, Canada: ICISS, 2001.

of the work and the orientation of the people entrusted.

5. *To serve*: The responsible leader as steward sees himself or herself not as opposed to the subordinate, but as *primus inter pares*, as the first among equals, as the first servant. This anthropological unity and equality of the leader with his or her employees is fundamental even if the task and responsibilities are very different.
6. *To share*: The ‘careholder’-steward shares the entrusted natural, material, human, and spiritual resources with the subordinate according to needs and performance. Since the manager is not owner, s/he cares for a just distribution of goods and fair access to services.

#### **1.4. Caring for the Five Protecting ‘Skins’**

Human as well as non-human life is vulnerable and is threatened in manifold ways. Life needs protection. Five levels of ‘skin’ to protect human life can be distinguished. They correspond to five basic needs: (1) First ‘skin’: the biological skin of the body, (2) Second ‘skin’: the clothes as protection of the body, (3) Third ‘skin’: the housing as protection from weather changes, (4) Fourth ‘skin’: the community as protection of the individuals, and (5) Fifth ‘skin’: the atmosphere as the overall ‘coat’ around the globe enabling life on earth. To care for the fifth skin means to be responsible for climate change prevention, mitigation, and adaptation, which will be taken up later in the second chapter.