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Every Part of Creation Matters

A discussion paper

Kees Nieuwerth, Peter Pavlovic and Adrian Shaw (Editors)



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conference of european churches

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INTRODUCTION

Discussion of current environmental challenges and a sustainable future is an extremely challenging brief. To be good stewards and to care for God's creation is part of the calling of churches. The Conference of European Churches' Governing Board decided to institute a thematic group to continue the work on Economic and Ecological Justice and a Sustainable Future. This working group was requested to look at creation theology, to undertake a critical analysis of the European sustainability policies, and to develop a document that may serve the dialogue both amongst the Member Churches and with the European institutions.

To help focus its discussions the group has given particular attention to developments taking place in the European Union collectively known as the European Green Deal (EGD). Though we recognise that CEC Member Churches are drawn from across Europe and also include Member Churches that are outside the European Union, the EGD is of international importance and will affect countries not only in the EU but also beyond its borders and quite possibly around the world. Alongside the discussion on the Green Deal, the thematic group has been reflecting on the theological frame and theological resources from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions that underpin the churches' work on creation.

In this context, we need to remind ourselves that Oecumene, Ecology, and Economy all share the same root: *oikos*, the household. They are all concerned – albeit it in different ways – with caring for our (common) household. Moreover, ecology and theology share the understanding that they are both about *relationships*: between God and human

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beings, between people, between human beings and other creatures, between heaven and earth.

In responding to the EGD this document serves both as an invitation to dialogue within and amongst the Member Churches as well as an effort to identify questions for further dialogue with European institutions. This discussion paper on green policy has been prepared as an opportunity both to share the thoughts of the group and to stimulate further discussion.

We recognise how challenging many of the issues we raise are and to help discuss these we offer some questions at the end of each section to promote dialogue on these important questions. We invite interested audiences within CEC Member Churches as well as colleagues from other parts of civil society to look at the questions raised and share with us their thoughts and responses to help us pursue a dialogue on these major concerns.

We also recognise that this document has been developed prior to the war in Ukraine. This new war right in the heart of Europe could – as some argue – *change everything*, including the EGD. In terms of the energy transition, the war has demonstrated how dependent most European countries are upon gas and oil from Russia. Energy prices are surging. This implies that more people in the lower income groups run the risk of “being left behind” and therefore need support from our governments.

This has brought the issue of our energy security to the fore. Frans Timmermans, First Vice President of the European Commission and Executive President of the EGD, has argued that we should step up the energy transition and become much less dependent upon fossil fuels from Russia in the short and medium term. If coal as a fossil energy source were phased out and (Russian) gas – another fossil source – becomes extremely expensive as well as a politically undesirable energy source, this may even *speed up* the energy transition argued for in the

EGD. At the same time, it is bringing renewed demands for new nuclear power stations and coal energy sources.

Another important change brought about by the war is in the field of agriculture and food security. Since Ukraine and Russia together normally export at least two-thirds of their cereal harvest to countries in the EU as well as North-Africa and the Middle East, the agricultural sector is expecting serious shortages and sharp price rises. There are pressures from some lobbyists to revise the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy of the EU, arguing that we should be more self-sufficient. As with energy use, greater self-sufficiency in agriculture may be advantageous but it also comes with risks. We are concerned that it may reinforce farming techniques that damage the soil or further reduce biodiversity, rather than soil-preserving and sustainable methods of farming which protect nature. Even here the recent developments in Europe may well offer opportunities as well as risks. For example, this may offer an opportunity to move towards a less meat-based diet and – from a sustainable point of view – a desired shift from animal husbandry to growing more fruit and vegetables, making the EU more self-reliant and potentially healthier in the future. We did not – and could not – take any of these recent developments into account when developing this document.

The EGD is a complex and ambitious programme responding to different realities in 27 different EU member states. We are also aware that churches all over Europe live in a variety of historical, social, and cultural settings. Their sensitivity, historical experience, and readiness to consider challenges related to ecology, climate change, and nature degradation may differ. The ambition of this document is not to offer a final answer – it is to launch a more intensive inter-church discussion.

When raising complex issues and fundamental questions, the responses given may differ widely – from expert to expert as well as from person to person. In the course of our work as a reference group we have

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found this to be the case even within our group, as well as between members of the working group. Yet we are united in presenting this document for reflection and discussion within our churches, convinced as we are that answers to these matters are urgently needed to face the great challenges involved in the green transition.

This is a consultation document. The Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches has received the document and now invites you to respond as CEC Member Churches, individual church members or any other interested person or organisation.

Please look at the questions in the report to let us know your thoughts and your own experience in dealing with the outlined challenges. We welcome your input to develop a better perspective of churches in Europe. We commend this document for further reflection. Contributions to this discussion are welcomed by the end of December 2022.

Kees Nieuwerth
Moderator,
*CEC Thematic Group
on Economic and Ecological Justice
and a Sustainable Future*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Caring for God's creation is part of the calling of the churches. In this report the Conference of European Churches is asking how this can best be done? We set out our ideas in two parts: first, a theology of caring for creation and, second, how we react to a most important new development in Europe – the European Union Green Deal.

The report has been prepared in a time of war and crises in energy markets following a pandemic that swept across the continents. The circumstances force us to consider how we live together in peace with each other and with creation, questions that are among the most important for the future of Europe. We urge you to think about the issues below, to discuss them and to respond. More details on how to respond can be found at the bottom.

Eco-theology – Caretaking for Creation

Theology has rediscovered its ecological dimension in recent decades. Care for creation, ecological justice, the role of human beings in degrading the natural environment and causing climate change have been intensively studied by theologians of different backgrounds and in churches of all confessional families. All of them are united in the conviction that creation theology occupies a central place in Church doctrine.

Christian faith is based on the conviction that creation is a gift offered to humanity by God the Creator, and it is the task of each individual to protect and cultivate it. Eco-theology helps us understand the wholeness of creation. When God created humans, he placed them as a

part of creation to receive the riches of the earth, a gift from God, and to seek their likeness to God by imitating the actions of God.

Creatio ex nihilo means “creation out of nothing”. The world does not belong to us and we are not its master. And if the world was created out of nothing it could return to nothing, a concern of which, as an environmental crisis threatens the future of life on earth, we are acutely aware. The critical ecological situation we face is, to a large extent, the result of the damaging human relationship whereby we have claimed superiority, manipulation, possession, and domination of creation. We call this anthropomorphism.

Where does healing and redemption from social and ecological injustice begin? According to the apostle Paul it is when we follow Christ to lead us towards redemption and the healing of creation. In Jesus, both human and God, we can find our Saviour and Redeemer and can thus become children of God. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can be transformed, and a new creation can happen within us calling us to see nature in a clearer way.

Rather than anthropomorphism we suggest an eco-centric spirituality in which humanity is part of creation and in which we rethink our place within it. The prefix “eco” comes from the Greek *oikos*, home, and the earth is our common home, a space not to be plundered with impunity, but to be taken care of and protected. We seek common ground with others concerned by injustice and urging deep social, political, and economic change as we know that the burden of ecological crises will fall disproportionately on the poorest and on those whose lives are yet to come.

We must acknowledge the human failure to develop a balanced relationship with the world, an egotistical worldview promoting dominance over nature through progress, prosperity, material possessions, and power. Earth-centrism places nature at the centre but does not recognise the leading human role in co-creation. We suggest a responsible anthropo-

centrism as a Christian response, accepting human centrality and our abuse of nature, but also recognising that ecological crises cannot be solved without the leading role of the human being.

Steward, caretaker, and priests of creation. We do not own the world but can act as co-creators, stewards, or caretakers. We are also priests of creation in offering creation, in its entirety, to God. Our relation to the earth is not just a practical role as caretaker but also a priestly one to celebrate creation.

Creation is continuing. Creation did not just happen in the distant past: it continues into the present and future. God supports, sustains, and preserves the world and is active in an ongoing creation. And as co-creators, human beings respond to God's call and participate with God as part of the continuing creation. The beauty of the world brings the heart to an act of praise in wonder at the beauty of God's creation and the presence of God.

We put the question to churches,

“What is enough for a good life? If material prosperity is no guarantee of happiness and fulfilment, is it then a deliberative and sacrificial mode of existence, which values voluntary restraint, sharing, and solidarity?”

The growing interest of churches in the protection of creation is an expression of core biblical principles, an expression of Christian faith, and the basis for understanding and responding to the ecological crisis. As Christians we have to be active in our lives in caring for creation.

The theological section summarises key aspects of several theological traditions and highlights some key theological issues that require further consideration. This section offers a base on which is discussed the proposal from the European Commission to promote a sustainable future – the European Green Deal, which commits the European Union to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Although generally welcomed, it also raises some questions for churches. A key role of Christian theo-

gy is to bear public witness to promote dialogue with other stakeholders in society, and this is the aim of the second part of the document.

From a Green Deal to a Green Economy

The European Green Deal aims to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy with no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 and an economic growth decoupled from resource use with no person and no region left behind. It will be supported with a budget of over one trillion euros from the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan and the EU's seven-year budget. We welcome the proposals but are uncertain whether they will deliver a green and just economy with no one left behind. Our concerns are related to following principal areas.

Leaving no one behind. To make the Green Deal effective citizens across Europe must be engaged and inequalities across the continent and beyond must be addressed. Thirty million Europeans were unable to adequately heat their homes in 2019, a problem made far worse by recent increases in energy prices. There must be action to ensure everyone has affordable warmth alongside the commitment to net zero carbon emissions. This has implications for those regions of Europe currently dependent on fossil fuels, particularly coal, and support for communities as part of a “just transition”. The Green Deal is a substantial programme from the EU. It is innovative not only in policy content, but also in its approach. Its success depends very much on the support and engagement of citizens. The success of the Green Deal will depend on significant changes in the habits, understanding, and way of life of EU citizens. Without citizen support and citizen participation the success of the Green Deal is open to question.

Lifestyle, consumerism, and sufficiency: What constitutes enough for a life in dignity? We need to adopt a different lifestyle in order to reduce air, water, and soil pollution, as well as the consumption of natu-

ral resources, but the proposals in the Green Deal will not necessarily deliver this. We have not shared equally the wealth we have acquired. Within countries across Europe and around the world there are great and systematic inequalities of wealth. Poverty exists alongside affluence within communities at every geographical scale.

Can there be infinite economic growth? The Green Deal does not question economic growth itself but suggests that it is possible to decouple economic growth from carbon emissions. Is this realistic? Carbon emissions have decreased from 1990 to 2019, while the economy grew by 60 percent. But consumption of resources has continued to grow and we are now deeply indebted to the natural world, a debt we will pass on to future generations and that will fall disproportionately on developing countries. We suggest that it is better to start by acknowledging the fact that our economies are embedded within and dependent upon nature.

A sustainable, fair, and green economy: Is a green and circular economy possible? What would a sustainable, fair, and green economy look like? We have explored alternative approaches, including “circular” economy, “degrowth”, “donut” economy, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All offer insights into what a green and fair economy might look like where the continuous pursuit of economic growth and the pursuit to increase efficiency are replaced by the pursuit of sufficiency.

Agriculture is a special concern. The Green Deal aims to transform agricultural policies to make agricultural subsidies subject to sustainable practices, but signs of transformation are slow to appear. There are also serious questions about relationships between agriculture and food production elsewhere in the world. Is the production of food in Europe and its part in the international trade in food products causing harm elsewhere?

Churches have an important role to play. With a long tradition of caring for others, helping those in greatest need, and a new awareness of the importance of caring for nature, churches are in a strong position to urge governments, local, national, or European to think differently and take action. To find a way to a sustainable future is not only a task for politicians, economists, or scientists, even if all of them have a substantial contribution. Our sustainable future is an existential concern that must include significant ethical decisions. In cooperation with other partners, churches and religious communities have a vital role to play in this process.

We invite churches in Europe and other partners to build a dialogue to help discern the way forward to a more sustainable future.

You can contribute by letting us know your thoughts.

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**RELATIONAL ECO-THEOLOGY –
A FOUNDING STONE OF CARETAKING
FOR CREATION**

BIBLICAL FRAME

The following text offers an overview of various schools of thought in the emerging field of green theology. Theology is not only about God and humans, since a biblical view of theology is inclusive of all creation. After all, Jesus, in his teaching, frequently draws upon natural surroundings and fellow creatures in his parables and narratives. As his disciples, we should also consider ourselves as part of creation, neither above it nor outside the vulnerable natural web of life of which we are part. Green theology is hence about relationships and mutual dependency. Celebrating these relationships makes it possible to confront the ecological crises (climate change, loss of biodiversity, and resource exhaustion) from a perspective of hope – central to Christian faith – rather than despair.

Creation theology occupies a central place in Church doctrine. Protection of the planet and care for creation constitute a core aspect of the Christian worldview. Recently emerging new interest on creation theology is to a large extent prompted by the growing environmental and climate challenges the world needs to face. The following text does not have an ambition to offer an overview of all nuances of current creation, eco-, and green theologies. Along with respecting this richness and acknowledging the need of creation theology to respond to new and emerging challenges, this document wants to underline the simple fact that creation theology is firmly rooted in biblical language and in theo-

logical tradition as it was developed over the centuries and draw out of this recognition a couple of implications.

The Christian faith is based on the conviction that creation is a gift offered to humanity by God the Creator, and the task of each individual is to protect and cultivate it (Gen. 2:15). Therefore, creation in Christian faith implies the well-being of humankind in harmony with nature. The love of God towards creation is expressed in various biblical stories, such as the one of Noah (Gen. 6:11–9:19), where God saves humanity along with all the animals. An intriguing example of the profound relationship between humanity and nature is found in the story of the King of Moab, Balak, and the prophet Bileam, who was humiliated by his talking donkey (Num. 22-24). In the New Testament, salvation through Jesus Christ also addresses the whole of creation. In John 1:11, for instance, it is written that He [Jesus] came to that which was his own. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus lived very close to nature while searching for a retreat in the desert and mountains. Furthermore, nature plays a great part in his preaching. Narratives are built on plants and agriculture. In Matthew 6:25-34, he invites his listeners to take flowers and birds as role models for a good, worry-free life. Today, Christians should recognise the crucifixion of Jesus Christ through the suffering of nature through anthropogenic climate change and environmental pollution.

Eco-theology and the growing recognition of human responsibility for creation is about changing and growing an inclusive understanding of the wholeness of living and non-living creation. It is about joining hands. It is about walking together and acknowledging that we are part of something greater that stretches far beyond us. Lamenting over the state of the world and this situation is the starting point for coming together. Eco-theology is about responding to the needs you meet on the way – like the good Samaritan. When you see a need, do not hesitate to act or respond. Do it alone, without help or funding, and people will see your struggle and fight and will come to join hands.

Creatio ex nihilo

The most basic question related to the biblical story of creation ultimately revolves around the proper understanding of the concept of creation itself, which must be examined dialectically along with its beginning/origin. The fact that the world had a beginning in an absolute sense was, as we are reminded by the Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas, “utter nonsense and absurdity to all ancient Greek thinkers.”¹ The idea of a radical beginning received, as a profound novelty, attention in the early stages of Christianity, and has been unfolded with careful consideration by Christian thinkers. In the 4th century, Athanasius believed the idea of creation included a beginning in an absolute sense, arguing that “between God and the world there is total ontological otherness.”² A Christian view of creation is founded on an acknowledgment of the radical beginning of created existence as well as of the un-originate existence of the Creator. “Creation as *ktisis* is a notion encountered for the first time [...] with the apostle Paul, and it clearly presupposes an absolutely ontological beginning.”³ With this, John Zizioulas stresses the relevance of the term *creation* and further outlines the need for the new concept of “ktisiology” in Christian vocabulary. By using the term *ktisis* rather than *demiourgia*, Zizioulas emphasises the absolute ontological character of the beginning of creation, which the Church fathers ontologically interpreted as creation “from (absolute) nothing.” As he explains: “The idea that the world has an absolute beginning could only

¹ John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 157.

² John Zizioulas, “On Being Other”, in *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 17.

³ John Zizioulas, “‘Created’ and ‘Uncreated’”, in *Communion and Otherness*, 253.

be expressed through the formula that the world was created ‘out of nothing’, *ex nihilo*.⁴

From the time of the early church (Athanasius and Nicea I), an awareness gradually developed that, between God and world, there exists an absolute, “abysmal” otherness. If it could be possible for something to arise from nothing, then it could also be possible that a totally other being could exist vis-à-vis God’s being. The doctrine of creation out of nothing was about otherness and freedom in ontology. Such a view of creation *ex nihilo* defines the parameters for the dialectic between created and uncreated, that required an understanding of the God-world relationship as one of reciprocal poles in a relationship of absolute otherness and the existence of a third pole of absolute nothingness to which the other two should point. In this context, absolute nothingness signifies the lack of any metaphysical kinship between God and creation at the level of existence. If God and the world were to confront one another for a moment, and their relationship be turned into what we call a dialectic, it follows that the universe would collapse. Antitheses can certainly be used. But in such an understanding, there is no dialectical relationship in an ontological sense. There is a mutual dependence. By emphasising *creatio ex nihilo* one makes clear that the world is not eternal. If the world were eternal, it would have no need to be created, and if it was not created from nothing, then the world was created from something that has some other existence. This is clearly a reversal of the ancient view and leads to the conclusion that “existence is the fruit of freedom”, since the self-referentiality of being, as perceived in ancient thought, is now abolished.⁵

⁴ John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 158.

⁵ Twentieth-century theology brought forward many fruits in accentuating far reaching philosophical and existential consequences of the doctrine of creation. See, e.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 37; Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God*, 16; Jürgen Moltmann,

The doctrine of creation out of nothing has clear ecological implications. The world does not belong to us and we are not uncontested masters of nature. As soon as the world is considered a gift offered by God, then any sort of dualism that undermines the dignity of the world's materiality is nullified. The fact that the world was created out of nothing, and is not eternal, means that there is also the possibility that it could return to nothing and cannot live eternally in its own right. On the other hand, if creation is a gift, originated from the absolute and creative will of God, then it possesses a natural or other means to guarantee eternal survival. This is an uncontested reality nowadays, when the environmental crisis threatens the very sustainability and the future of the planet in its entirety. It is sufficient here to refer to the expanding of global warming, the radical consequences of climate change for biodiversity, and the survival of all creatures, including human beings, in order to realise that our world is, today as never before, under the yoke of death. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* implies the unique value of our world, its inherent dignity, differs from other cosmogonical views, such as emanation originated in Eastern spirituality. While emanation offers the conceptual frame for pantheism, *creatio ex nihilo* emphasises fragility and the uniqueness of the finite world understood as creation that substantially differs from God.

God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); John Zizioulas, "On Being Other"; "Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology", *King's Theological Review* 12–13 (1989–1990); "'Created' and 'Uncreated'"; and others.

On the way to healing and redemption

Nature and the whole of creation are longing for redemption. Creation is out of balance and groaning, as we read in Romans 8:18-23.⁶ The redemption of humans is a healing force for creation. Humans and nature cannot be separated in this matter. Social justice, as well as the balance between humanity and nature, are out of order. The ecosystem disturbance and the social system disturbance mirror each other and they are destroying each other. Social injustice is worsening the ecosystem disturbance, and the worsening of the ecosystems is creating more problems for the social justice balance. We need to focus on both for either one to be healed. How can this healing begin? According to the apostle Paul it is when we, human beings, begin to follow the example of Christ. This includes a change of lifestyle, mentality, and adopting a spirit that makes a difference. This will lead to our own redemption and the healing of the entire creation.

As true God and true human, Jesus Christ incarnates an image not only of God but also of a form of humanity that is still a true image of God. Jesus himself is that image, and we shall try to imitate him (*imitatio Christi*). We are bearers of the image of God, but it is ever changing. We can never give up the vision that the likeness of God exists in each human and that it is always incarnating and being expressed through human growth. But when God created humans, he placed them as a part

⁶ “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”

of creation with a purpose in order to receive the riches of the earth as a gift from God. It is with this starting point that humans should seek and unfold their likeness to God. This likeness is not a gift given once and for all but is something we must grow into by imitating the actions of God. Humans are the only part of creation that have been given this unique task. Trinitarian theology of creation offers in this respect an enormously important contribution.⁷

In the Nicene Creed, we find strong motives for reflection over creation and nature. The creed describes the fundamental perception of God's unity in the Trinity. There is a distinct description of the Son, namely, that he is from eternity, light of light, and through him all things were made. Jesus as *Logos*, God's eternal wisdom, is also to be found in John 1:3, which says: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made". As the *Logos*, Jesus has a direct relationship with nature and the entire created world; this friendship is seen unfold in the gospels and goes back to the first day of creation. Through Mary, Jesus is incarnated and takes on our humanity (except sin). This means he can suffer, feel hunger and cry, and (in the end be crucified and) die. Through him, being both human and God, he can become our Saviour and Redeemer. We can thus become children of God. We are formed of dust, but we are not only dust – we are also spirit. This beautiful blend of dust and spirit is what defines us as created beings. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's *Logos*, we can be touched anew by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. A new creation is happening within us and we become new creatures. As new creatures, we are called to see nature with all our fellow creatures in a clearer and more committed way. We see the incarnated Jesus hidden in creation and in our own humanity. This gives a mighty impulse to draw near to creation and to care for all that belongs to it. In this respect the community of all creation is the community called together

⁷ See, e.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*.

by the Holy Spirit as the community of Holy Spirit. The discovery of the cosmic breadth of the Spirit is an important step that leads to the respect of the dignity of all the creatures in which God is present by his Spirit. In the present situation, this discovery constitutes the necessary presupposition for the survival of humanity on God's one earth.⁸

In view of the progressing climate crisis, the question "How did God want the world to survive?" is, from a Christian point of view, not just theoretical, but relates to the core of the gospel message and the Christian witness to the world. Various answers proposed to this question over time point to an inherent capacity of the world itself to be saved by itself. Death, the ultimate "enemy" of humankind and creation as a whole, cannot, however, be conquered from a Christian perspective in this way. It requires another way of thinking and mode of life. Important elements for this effort are offered in Chalcedonian Christology, especially the promotion of the concept of "hypostatic union" and prioritising the person over the two natures of Christ. In Maximus the Confessor's view, to overcome death, a relationship is necessary between the created and the uncreated. It is the human being who must undertake this role. However, the Fall foiled this divinely-ordained task, necessitating a change in the divine plan. What is now required is for the *Logos* to become human. The Chalcedonian definition, and particularly the clause "without confusion" and "without division", describes the relationship between God and humanity (but also creation as a whole) in the person of Christ. The latter highlights the necessity of no separation between created and uncreated, since there must also be real communion at an ontological level in order to avoid both the self-referentiality of the creation and death. The former guarantees the freedom, otherness and the dignity of the two realities; otherwise, the relationship would not be free. The two concepts are mediated in Christ, in whom communion and

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *L'Esprit qui donne la vie: Une pneumologie intégrale*, trans. Joseph Hoffmann (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1999), 28.

otherness coincide. Christ's resurrection offers the whole of creation a victory over death and salvation. This Christocentric understanding of the relationship between God and the world leads to a new ethos, where everything that exists constitutes an element of loving communion, necessary for the divine plan to become true. In other words, no pollution, devaluation, unjust exploitation of resources, and destruction of biodiversity and life of creation is justified. In addition, this Christocentric view of creation provides the foundation upon which the ontological interdependence of all creatures and elements of creation is fully manifested.

ECO-THEOLOGIES – GROWING CONCERNS FOR CREATION

Critique of human domination

Relations of humanity to the world expressed in theology as relations to creation have long been marked by triumphalism and by an attitude of human dominance over nature. The gradual evolution underpinning this ambiance, in which the development of rationalism and overoptimistic reliance on the capacity of human ratio played a significant role, culminated in the second half of the 19th and first decades of the 20th centuries. Technological inventions and multiple achievements of industrialisation, as well as economic progress and gradual western dominance present in other parts of the globe, were the driving forces of these developments. These triumphs also transformed the reflections of the relationship of humanity with nature and the world around us. The biblical story of creation became an instrument granting the human being the position of unrestricted lord of the earth. An image guiding that period is one of humanity possessing enormous capacities that should be used to its own benefit. The critical ecological situation we face nowadays is, to a large extent, the result of a human perception defining its relationship to creation in terms of superiority, manipulation, possession and domination. The reflections of theology in that period in many respects allowed, or even supported, such an approach.

Theology of the 21st century critically examines past mistakes, makes an effort to take them seriously, and is ready to undertake steps in order to learn from them. Churches of all traditions are joined in this critique, as was expressed in Pope Francis's *Laudato si* encyclical:

“Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; this in turn is the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society.”⁹

Or in the words of Jürgen Moltmann:

“We cannot ignore the historical effects of the . . . misunderstood and misused biblical belief in creation. . . . The Christian belief in creation as it has been maintained in the European and American Christianity of the Western churches is therefore not guiltless of the crisis in the world today. . . . How must the Christian belief in creation be interpreted and reformulated, if it is no longer to be itself one factor in the ecological crisis and the destruction of nature, but is instead to become a ferment working towards the peace with nature which we seek?”¹⁰

Churches from all traditions also share a desire to overcome this heritage of the recent past in favour of a deeper appreciation of Christian history and tradition, as well as a better understanding of the context of earlier periods of Christianity. Numerous theological studies in development today put under scrutiny that part of the recent past that allowed for the neglect of important parts of Christian history and endorsed the propagation and legitimation of dominating anthropocentrism. Theolog-

⁹ *Laudato si*, 116.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 20–21.

ical efforts now go beyond that past and are working hard to learn from it. The former emphasis on the role of the human as the crown and glory of creation is nowadays, in most relevant theological approaches, critically seen as a side-step overly influenced by western economic and ideological dominance, and closely linked to industrial developments of the last two centuries. Humility, partnership, and relationship replace dominion and ownership. Key conceptual motifs enabling a theological reflection of current ecological challenges have become earth-centric and eco-centric theology, with a renewed emphasis on incarnation, relational anthropology, supported by theological emphasis on justice, solidarity and transformation.

Earth-centric and eco-centric spirituality

The progression of climate change and the gradually worsening environmental crises are offering multiple reasons for a shift from the direction of an excessive anthropocentric stance to considerations of an inclusive planetary justice and solidarity. Instead of accentuating domination, critical attention is being given to the fact that humans were created from dust and to the fact that mankind was created together with, and is eternally linked to, the other parts of creation. In looking at the story of creation and the theological relevance of the relationship humanity has with the world, an abundant emphasis is being given to respect, the need to embrace all of creation, and to go beyond an anthropocentric focus.

This is nothing more than putting at the forefront an understanding of the human race as an equal part of creation and the need to identify ourselves as part of and as one with creation. The human being is not solely a political citizen of the world but is a part of creation. There is a need to reshape our thoughts about political systems as having an aim to control and define the world in favour of those that take into consideration whole ecosystems and outline a framework for our lives here on Earth. There are ample reasons to call for planetary solidarity and for a

response to climate change that will expand justice and rights of creation, nature, animals, and ecosystems, recognising their community and their part in stabilising life on earth.

Talking about solidarity, with regard to climate change, often takes human rights as a starting point, underlining that climate change will affect those with the least political and economic power to take a stance against the changes. Climate change solidarity focuses on ethnicity and poverty, on power, economy and access to resources. But where does creation actually have a place in this? All the focus is, in the end, tied to human conditions and human rights. We are not concerned with conserving water for nature's sake but for people's sake. As is often formulated, it is an anthropocentric focus that needs reshaping, in order for it to become a concern for all of creation not only for humankind's sake but also for creation's sake.

Along with the deepening of solidarity in the context of the whole creation, increasing attention is given to the concept of justice and to the need for transformation in this era of climate crisis. It is widely acknowledged that ecological calamities are closely linked with justice concerns. Justice in the context of climate change includes several dimensions:

- The fact that impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed and that regions inhabited by those who contributed to the production of greenhouse gases the least have been highly and unproportionally impacted – the need of justice for the most vulnerable;
- The fact that, in its present condition, humanity extracts resources from the earth with the consequence of an unproportioned ecological footprint and with such recklessness that the earth is in no position to recover or repair the necessary balance – injustice against the earth;

- The fact that most of the impacts of climate change will be suffered by those who are not yet born – injustice against future generations. Intergenerational injustice has become the desperate sign of humanity’s drive for prosperity based on the plundering of nature.

Highlighting the value of justice in the context of climate change often brings to the forefront social and political engagement and the call for the improvement of the wellbeing of the least fortunate in world societies. This is closely related to highlighting responsibility towards the common good and to a commitment to combat inequality. Efforts for solidarity and justice advocate for active measures against oppression and for securing social equality.

In facing the current ecological crises there is a widespread call for earth-centric spirituality. There are a number of concerns that churches share in their growing engagement in taking care for creation. Indeed, earth-centred spirituality offers a platform for underlining the key message that we all learned in the current situation: Ecological challenges are not to be reduced to problems of nature and a world exclusive of humanity’s place in it. Ecological challenges are existential concerns. They touch the core elements of our humanity and include matters of life and death.

Earth-centric spirituality is an expression of an understandable effort to address critically the human desire for dominion over nature by putting an emphasis on the need for respect and humility in the relationship humankind has with nature. However, neither earth-centric nor bio-centric spirituality can be a solution to the ecological crisis. While sharing many concerns expressed in earth-centric spirituality and underlining the essential recognition that the creation is much more than a milieu providing a utilitarian and instrumental value for humanity, there are some questions that need further attention in this regard. The most important among them are: Does the rest of creation share the inherent

worth and dignity that humans have? What is the particular role of the human being in the human-to-nature relationship?

In this regard it is helpful to turn attention to the historic meaning of the Greek term *oikos*. Today, a growing number of expressions beginning with “eco-” are in use. Besides ecology and economy, we talk of ecosystem, eco-management, eco-business, eco-philosophy, eco-travel, eco-service, etc. With the multiplication of the prefix “eco-” in modern international language, it seems that whatever is equipped with the label “eco” makes any product greener and more attractive. The prefix is being used as an additional attribute to activities, institutions and subjects. But if we consider the original sense of *oikos*, then it is clear that “eco” is not just an extra attribute. The linguistic root of this term goes back to the concept of home. *Oikos*, and consequently the prefix “eco” in numerous words used in modern languages, calls to mind a holistic inclusion that expands our view of the whole creation, which is supposed to be our common home. In the same way as it is natural for every human being to relate to our home as the place that provides shelter, guarantees our safety, and offers a space for developing relationships with those closest to us, the earth is supposed to be a home for all humanity, not one to be plundered with impunity, but a space that provides all that is necessary for life, a place to be taken care of and protected. We are not only users of the *oikos*, but guardians of it: “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).

What is needed, along with an emphasis on respect and humility in the context of creation, which is so underlined by earth-centric spirituality, is an acknowledgment that humanity has the particular role and responsibility to take care of the earth. In this regard, we believe there is a need to distinguish earth-centric spirituality from eco-centric spirituality, which is distinguished from the former by an explicit accent on humani-

ty's accountability and responsibility in caring for the world and creating from the world a common home for all.

Deep incarnation

Theological efforts aiming to express a close relationship of God with the created order take numerous shapes. The most prominent among them relates to a theological initiative under the term “deep incarnation”, coined by Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen in his 2001 article “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World”. In it, he meant to give theological expression to the perception that God's incarnation in Christ reaches into the heart of material, biological, and social existence. The concept of deep incarnation underlines that:

“God's Logos . . . was made flesh in Jesus the Christ in such a comprehensive manner that God, by assuming the particular life story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, also conjoined the material conditions of creaturely existence (“all flesh”), shared and ennobled the fate of all biological life forms (“grass” and “lilies”), and experienced the pains of sensitive creatures (“sparrows” and “foxes”) from within. Deep incarnation thus presupposes a radical embodiment that reaches into the roots (radices) of material and biological existence as well as into the darker sides of creation: the *tenebrae creationis*.”¹¹

At the centre of deep incarnation is a recall to the historic roots of Christianity. Deep incarnation does not add anything unexpected to the body of Christian doctrine or anything that would not already be rooted

¹¹ The term “deep incarnation” was recently coined by Niels Henrik Gregersen, Professor of Systematic Theology in Copenhagen. See Niels Gregersen, “The Extended Body of Christ: Three Dimensions of Deep Incarnation”, in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depths of Christology*, ed. Niels Gregersen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 225–252.

in Christian doctrine from its early stages. Theology of deep incarnation develops its argument mainly as a response to the theological context following up Friedrich Schleiermacher's Christology, based on the conviction that God is fully present only in the divine consciousness of Jesus, as was developed in some western Protestant circles in the late 19th century. Biological humanity is, as understood in this perspective, the basis of sin, not of salvation. Overcoming sinfulness is done through the individual's effort to focus on developing personal relationship with God through individual prayer and individual piety. The perspective of deep incarnation is different. Christology underlines as much the fleshliness of Christ as it does his consciousness; as much the biology of growth, vulnerability, and decay as it does the heights of religious awareness; and as much the world of creation as Jesus as a human individual.¹² Deep incarnation theology offers, in many respects, a response to a justified critique of Western Protestantism, often coming from Orthodox theology, for its individualistic soteriology. Therefore, deep incarnation focuses not only on the person of Jesus but also the environment of Jesus. The soteriology, as propagated by a deep incarnation approach, covers not only salvation of humanity but also its environment, including earth, living creatures, and neighbours.

The Son of God participated in life in the created world. It is not a sterile sharing. Becoming flesh not only means "body and flesh", referring to the historical person of Jesus, but it means that he shared the space and time of the world, he interacted with the environment with his breathing, eating, drinking, and moving. Deep incarnation suggests that incarnation of *Logos* assumed "the full gamut of material and biological existence through the specific humanity of Jesus."¹³

¹² Niels Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation. Why Continuity Matters for Christology", *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26:2, 173–178.

¹³ Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation", *ibid.*, 175.

Deep incarnation underlines the fact that the incarnation of Jesus is neither a “gnostic redeemer myth”, as argued by Rudolf Bultmann, nor a “plain personal” neo-platonic incarnation, as argued by Adolf von Harnack. Both views have a specific individualistic overtone. The story of Jesus and the redemption are interpreted from a strongly anthropocentric angle, focusing on persons, human activities, and individual needs. Deep incarnation equally belongs to a series of new methodologies that include a number of others, such as deep ecology, social ecology, eco-feminism, and others. What unites these efforts is care for social, economic and ecological injustice, active promoting of justice, protection of nature, and engagement against every form of discrimination and neglect, as well as a drive urging fundamental social, political, and economic changes withing the whole mental paradigm.

RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY. ACKNOWLEDGING HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

Theological approaches of the 21st century are united in their concerted efforts to emphasise solidarity, justice, and to place humanity within the whole ecosystem. Additionally, another element plays a substantial role in most of these concepts – the apprehension of anthropocentrism. While sharing the critique of human superiority, domination, and desire for possession, often subsumed under the umbrella term “anthropocentrism,” we want to put forward a concern that an unqualified critique of anthropocentrism goes too far. Seeing humanity as part of the whole ecosystem, without distinguishing a particular role and particular responsibility that humanity has towards the world and the ecosystem in which we live, risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Current ecological and climate crises have enabled the discovery that, different to any other preceding period of history, human beings have become active subjects in determining the quality and shape of their surroundings. We are not no longer solely occupying the role of a passive observer in our relationship to the world. Human beings are no longer only using nature and benefiting from nature; we have become active shapers of this nature. This is expressed through the term “an-

thropocene”. Coined by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, this term has received wide acceptance in the short space of the last two decades. It has led to the scientific understanding that we have recently entered into an entirely new phase of planetary history in which human beings are the driving force. And humankind will most likely remain a major geological force for a long time to come.

In considering the currently worsening ecological crisis, it has become clear that problems of ecology are closely related to the activity of human beings and to humankind’s capacity to handle its affairs and take responsibility for its own actions. Ecological problems are not to be reduced to the problem of the earth. They are problems in direct consequence to the relationship between humans and the earth. Problems of ecology cannot be fixed without taking anthropology into account, nor without taking into account the concept of who we are as human beings and questioning our own identity. The climate crisis is, to a large extent, a result of a conception of humankind that perceives creation in terms of our superiority, possession, and domination.

Christian anthropology makes a decisive contribution to a better understanding of the role and the task of the human individual in the world, as well as the close link between humanity and creation. Based on the core ecological problem, the real challenge is the way one responds to the basic question “Who am I?”. Ecological challenges cannot be solved without looking at how to interpret human identity.

Anthropology examines the personalist and relational understanding of the human being that seeks to overcome the alleged fixed dichotomy between humankind and the world, between humanity and nature. Personalistic and relational ontology and anthropology have a long tradition within Christian theology. From early centuries, it already offered key insights on Christianity in that God, the Creator, cannot be identified from an ontological point of view as a “simple entity”. Nor can God be a fully extrinsic and transcendent entity distant from the created world.

God is a personal being. The best expression of what Christianity understands under the term “God” is in the description of the relationship between three entities: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Related to this is the key contribution Christian theology, at this stage of its development, already gave to the perception of the structure of personality. From the early centuries of Christianity, the word “person” has defined the basic term for describing the reality of God. God exists as a community of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The term “person” became a precondition and a constitutive element for understanding the divine essence. God cannot, in essence, exist outside the interrelationship of the three persons. Personality, as such, is not divine and invisible. However, it bears the seal of divinity. This manifests itself in the very special character of the existence of the personality, which is the ability to be in a mutual relationship. Relationships between people are invisible and mysterious. This is where the divine presence manifests itself.

Unfortunately, a number of these insights have long been neglected in the public perception of Christianity. As a result, we are increasingly aware that certain aspects of what has since become the mainstream theological anthropology of the previous two centuries constitute a part of the interwoven problem of current ecological challenges and not their solution. There is a chance that, by stressing the need to reconsider personalist and relational aspects of Christian theology and anthropology, we may get an opportunity to address the present situation in a way that matters.

Substantialist ontology defines humanity as being *against* the world, while a personalistic ontological view puts the emphasis on the relationship *between* them. The human being is understood to be part of a network of relations, bestowed however with a primary responsibility and a role to play. If one tries to throw out this anthropocentric view, the result downplays the responsibility of humanity in the destruction, but also in

the salvation, of creation, while bestowing upon creation the power to save itself, something that can hardly be reconciled with dogmatic orthodoxy.

In an approach offered by personalistic and relational anthropology, the human being is defined in terms of relationship, in contrast to the position that sees humans as a self-sufficient and closed identity existing outside of its surroundings and based on a sharp dichotomy between man and the world. The human being is seen here as an essential part of a triangle – humans, world and God – and is defined through relationships with other parts of the triangle. This approach acknowledges that human beings are indeed “part of something bigger that goes beyond us”, yet it is not “any” part. Humans are the central part of creation. This central role of humankind is related, not just in direction of humans to the earth, which could easily be misunderstood if put out of the context of a relationship with God. Central to humanity is an expression of the relationship between humans and God.¹⁴

Relational understanding of humanity serves as the background of an ethos that can be expressed with the simple phrase: every part of creation matters. In such a case, human beings can be seen through the lens of their priestly role, meaning that they are responsible for offering the whole creation to God in the work on their own salvation. This is not only a moral task but a way of life that seriously takes creation into account in all its aspects as an ontological component of the *imago Dei*. God is the source of the responsibility given to humans for managing creation. God is the source of creation and from whom humans received the task to care for creation. God did not put us at the centre of his crea-

¹⁴ For more on relational ontology from an Eastern Orthodox perspective see: John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

tion in order for us to exploit it mercilessly and irresponsibly, but precisely to take good care of it and to cultivate it in such a manner so as to make it “transparent,” that is, to see Him, the Offerer, in what He has offered us!

Christological concerns in expressing God’s engagement in the world and God’s care for creation are expressed through an emphasis on the distinction between anthropocentrism and anthropomonism. In clarifying this distinction, it may help to see the term anthropomonism as closely related to the similar term of egocentrism. It is used as a term to describe human failure in developing a balanced human relationship with the world. Anthropomonism is an expression which not only puts human beings and their egos at the centre of everything but, at the same time, sees their relationship as external to everything, in terms of dominance, manipulation and profit-seeking.

Anthropocentrism, on the other hand, puts an emphasis on centrality, which is not unrestricted but is qualified in an important sense. Centrality, which is neither characterised by the desire for selfish manipulation or an abuse of creation, nor defined in terms of power, is a concept leading to the acknowledgment of responsibility for the world, the duty to use all creation with care and accountability in our relationship with this world. Anthropocentrism is a term with a long history in Christian theology and Christian anthropology and is firmly rooted in the history of Christian doctrine. By presenting humanity on the central stage of world history, it simultaneously expresses a particular human capacity and a particular human responsibility for affairs relating to other parts of creation.¹⁵

¹⁵ “There is no doubt that anthropocentrism in the sense of anthropomonism must be rejected. . . . Anthropomonism in this sense directly contradicts the respect due to God’s Creation and is one of the important roots of today’s ecological crisis. . . . But if anthropocentrism refers to the fact that human beings are called to fulfil a special and specific role in the world, it must be main-

A qualified anthropocentrism, contrary to anthropomonism, is consistent with an eco-centric approach. Eco-centrism takes the historic roots of the prefix “eco-” into consideration by pointing to the definition of *oikos* – the home, in a broad sense. *Oikos*, as the space, not only provides what is necessary for life but also describes the space where human beings have a central role in taking care of it and have a responsibility towards life. Using the prefix “eco-” offers an opportunity to automatically include and consider what is important beyond an earth-centric approach. The term includes at the same time a strong connotation with human responsibility for the world, as well as the responsibility for our common home/*oikos*.

A qualified anthropocentrism distinguishes itself from anthropomonism, which finds human beings in isolation and without any reasonable contextual interrelationship. In a similar sense, *eco*-centrism is opposed to *ego*-centrism, which is used as another word to express human desire for dominion and a failure to take care of the earth. Eco-centric spirituality, in its understanding of “earth-centric” and centring on *oikos*, home for all humanity, and in its acceptance of the central role of a responsible and accountable human being, and of humankind as closely related to other parts of creation, is a concept that deserves close attention. Anthropocentric and eco-centric spirituality are closely related.

When coming to a shared agreement on the widespread concerns on climate change and ecological destruction, and when sharing these concerns among numerous societal groups, ideological and religious streams, it is important to pay attention to different terms and a variety of conceptual manifestations when expressing these concerns. The same words may not always express the same content. At the same time, the exact opposite may occur when similar concerns are expressed through

tained.” *Listening to Creation Groaning*, ed. Lukas Vischer, John Knox Series (Centre International Réformé John Knox: Geneva, 2004), 21–22.

different terms and lexical differences, thereby hindering a discernment of deeper resonance.

The Christian approach to the ecological crisis may, in some respects, differ from the approach of some others. The ecological crisis cannot be solved without taking into consideration the specific role of the human being. Earth-centric spirituality, in its perspective of the mainly passive role of humankind, just as the anthropomonic approach, in its perspective of the human being as an isolated manipulator presented through a wish to manage ecological challenges purely via technological achievements, cannot offer a viable solution from a Christian perspective. The specific sign of a Christian contribution to the discussion of the ecological crisis must be based on an insistence on the centrality of the human being and a qualified anthropocentrism through which it acknowledges human responsibility for the world understood as God's creation. A Christian perception of personhood provides modern man with an ethos that takes *a priori* the relevance of the whole creation into account as a *sine qua non* condition for the rescue and salvation of all humanity.

THE HUMAN BEING – A STEWARD, CARETAKER, AND PRIEST OF CREATION

Steward and caretaker of creation

A careful balance between the need for humility and respect towards creation and the acknowledgement of the human responsibility, including its central role in taking care of the earth, expresses an eco-centric approach through the reciprocal relationship between humanity and the world. Eco-centrism and a qualified anthropocentrism, seen through the perspective of relational anthropology, and opposed to anthropomorphism or egocentrism, are closely related and complementary.

The mandate and task given to human beings in the cultivation of creation and its care do not imply ownership over it. We are not owners of the world: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24:1). The status of humans in the world is ambivalent. Sometimes it is expressed through a careful distinction between having the permission to have possession of the created world without, however, having ownership of it. This is why Philip Hefner called us “created co-creator”,¹⁶ putting forward the idea that humankind has been created as part of God’s creation, with a special mandate to act

¹⁶ The term as is presently used in theology was introduced in 1984 by Philip Hefner. See Hefner, “The Creation”, in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 269–362.

as a co-creator, meaning tasked with the participation in God's creative purpose. This twofold situation can be better understood with the help of the biblical term of "stewardship".

According to a secular definition, stewardship is the "responsibility for sustainable development shared by all those whose actions affect environmental performance, economic activity, and social progress, reflected as both a value and a practice by individuals, organisations, communities, and competent authorities."¹⁷

The secular version of stewardship includes not only environmental and social activities, but equally economic activities, and names as responsible actors both natural and legal persons. This is the background principle for a "stewardship economy". Its key parts are "stewardship councils" that serve as key components engaging numerous stakeholders in the managements of big entities.

The biblical concept of stewardship is rooted in the understanding of the world as creation. Human beings are not owners of the world. We are following the task of managers and carers given to us by God. We are all stewards and caretakers of the world, and God has entrusted us with the resources, abilities and opportunities to care, and each of us will be called to give an account of how we chose to manage what God gave to us.

Along with recognising its benefits, it is also necessary to admit the complexity and fragility of a stewardship economy. The question behind it is the following: What is the ruling principle of such a stewardship and caretaking role in relation to creation? One who contributed significantly to the theological principles of stewardship is John Calvin (1509–1564). In his commentary on Genesis 2:15, he underlined in particular the divine mandate of stewardship:

¹⁷ "Event sustainability management systems" (ISO 20121: 3.20).

“The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that, being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.”¹⁸

Stewardship, in the biblical sense, includes a broader sense than only a limited focus on economy related to management of finance and economy. Stewardship is motivated by a transcendent, divine purpose that requires a response from the responsible steward. In the parable of the (un)just steward (Luke 16), the steward knows that his master will ask about his choices and charge him for them. In order to avoid the worst future, he acts with utmost precaution and care in order to reduce the debt of the debtors. The details are not of value here. The important learning is that the steward acted moderately in order to avoid the hostile impacts of unpredictable future events. It is a deal that may perhaps be painful at present but remains nonetheless recommended, valued advice when considering a sustainable future. Accountability and responsibility are inherent parts of stewardship. We all need to embrace a broad view of stewardship and the responsibility of human caretaking that links us with the world around us and with all that God is doing in the world.

Priest of creation

A close link between humanity and creation is also expressed in a concept that moves in parallel with the concept of stewardship: the image of the human being as a “priest of creation”.¹⁹ It is an approach underlining an existential dimension of the relationship between human-

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis I*, Genesis 2:15, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01/calcom01.viii.i.html>.

¹⁹ See, e.g., John Zizioulas, “Preserving God’s Creation”.

ity and the world around. It is an acknowledgement of our responsibility for the earth and an acceptance of the fact that ecological concerns are matters of life and death.

Relational and communal understanding of humanity serve as the backdrop of an ethos that can be expressed with this phrase: Every part of creation matters, or every creature of God matters. If this is the case, humans can be seen through the lens of their priestly role, meaning that one is responsible for offering the whole creation to God in order to survive eternally. It is not just a moral task but a new way of life that seriously takes creation, in all its aspects, into account as an ontological component of the *imago Dei*.

Human beings are endowed with the freedom to either destroy creation or affirm its existence. It is due to the freedom bestowed on humanity that man possesses the capacity to “transcend the limitations of nature to the point of denying nature itself or anything given.”²⁰ It is at this point precisely that man’s role as a priest of creation emerges. Creation in itself, devoid of any natural means of salvation, needs man as priest to “freely unify it and refer it back to its Creator.”²¹

The idea of a close relationship between humanity and creation, and responsibility of humanity for creation, is a driving force characterising the Christian relation to the world that has existed from the early stages of Christianity. Humanity undertakes its priestly role by offering creation, in its entirety, to God the Father (“εις τόπον Θεοῦ”, according to Ignatius of Antioch), so as to gain eternal life. In this vein, human beings become priests of creation, the ones called to treat the world not only with respect but also “with creativity so that its parts may form a

²⁰ John Zizioulas, “Creation Theology: An Orthodox perspective”, in *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 42.

²¹ John Zizioulas, “Toward an Environmental Ethic”, *ibid.*, 168.

whole and this whole may transcend its boundaries by being brought into relation with God.”²²

In the 7th century, Maximus the Confessor was among those who offered a deep understanding of the human being as a part of creation. Maximus not only sees parallels between failures of human beings and the state of the world, describing them in the vocabulary of falls in the cosmos and a fall of the entirety of creation. He also sees the close relation between the need to restore the person, which is done through redemption, and the need of renewal or “re-creation” of the whole of creation. The view of the human person as “priest of creation” plays the central role in his vision of restoring all creation. In Maximus’s view, the whole history of humanity is marked by Adam’s error in the heavenly garden, who refused the call to be a priest of creation and instead gave preference to exploiting and gaining pleasure from creation. The heart of being a priest of creation is to offer all of creation, including humanity, to God, so that God, in turn, can sanctify creation, returning the offering completely transformed. In this way, creation plays the key role in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. The created world is, therefore, not a hindrance to our salvation but an environment that enables our spiritual growth. Thus, the relationship between humanity and the world is mutual: humans sanctify creation, and creation helps us in our salvation.

As outlined by patristics, the priestly role of every human person is also closely related to subsequent thoughts of the founders of Protestantism, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, and their teaching on the universal priesthood of each person faithful to Christ. In reference to the biblical quote: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9), Luther underlines: “In this way we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians”, which he underpins with an additional reference to 1 Corinthians 4:1: “No one should regard us as anything

²² John Zizioulas, “The Book of Revelation and the Natural Environment”, *ibid.*, 35.

else than ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God.”²³ The focus is obviously given to cultivating interpersonal relationships and paying respect to personal communication with God. Within this is, nevertheless, included an intention to bring the whole creation into relationship with God.

A parallel and complementary advancement of both concepts underlying the role of the human being as “the steward and caretaker”, as well as “the priest” of the creation, allows for the discernment of a variety of aspects of the relationship between humanity and the world. It underscores the responsibility of humanity for preserving and maintaining creation, the importance of going beyond a mere stewardship or a managerial approach to nature, and seeking the proper place of humanity in its respect of the world in all its beauty, as well as defining its borders and limitations.

²³ *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* [Prelude Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church], Weimar Ausgabe 6:564.6-14 as quoted in Norman Nagel, “Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers”, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61:4 (October 1997), 283–84.

GOD AS AN ACTOR AND ACTIVE STAKEHOLDER IN CARE FOR CREATION. SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

The ecological problems the world has been facing over the last several decades can be, to a large extent, correlated with the gradual dislocation of the religious meta-narrative and its replacement with a secular one. However, the biblical account of the world as creation is not only a story of the past. It has a lot to offer in the present situation, marked by multiple ecological challenges.

The story of creation offers a key narrative in outlining a Christian perspective on the relationship of humankind to the world around. The first persons of Adam and Eve were put in God's garden in order to live in harmony with creation. An important part of that narrative is that creation is not referred to as something God did a long time ago but to something God does all the time. God's activity, and his presence, is extended until the present time through creation. The act of creation is not limited to a single act in a precisely given moment of the past but extends to the very present. This is an image of continuing creation that highlights God as not only transcendent but also immanent. God sup-

ports, sustains, and preserves the world and is active in an ongoing creative sense.²⁴

In reflecting on the creation narrative, God, as referenced by many patristic authors, has been presented not only as the Creator of the world but also as the *Pantocrator*, that is, the one who holds and sustains all things into existence. This belief has been very strongly expressed since the early centuries of Christianity and in traditional Orthodox ecclesial architecture and iconography, through, for example, an image of Christ holding the Earth. Christ is, in this imagery, seen as God's agent in creation. He is at the same time a servant and a priest, and a mediator between creation and God. What role does God play in the ecological crisis through which we are living?

The particular role given to humanity is not limited to that of a passive observer or receiver of God's benefits. Human beings respond to God's call and participate with God as part of the continuing creation. The image of humanity as created co-creator – even the term “created co-creator” has only been developed recently – succinctly expresses this relationship. German theologian Hubert Meisinger summarises this concept with the following words:

“Humans are created by God to be co-creators in the creation that God has purposefully brought into being. The word *created* thus relates to being created by God as part of the evolutionary reality. . . . The word *co-creator* reflects the freedom of humans to participate in fulfilling God's purpose. The paradigm of the created co-creator is Jesus Christ who reveals that the essential reality of humans has never been outside God.”²⁵

²⁴ See, e.g., Isaiah 40–44; Psalms 8; 104:30; Job; etc.

²⁵ J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen, ed., *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 1:183.

The mandate of created co-creator also implies the participation in the restoration of the world and re-creation of what has been disturbed and distanced from its original purpose.

From a Christian perspective, the relationship in taking care for creation by all actors involved (God, humanity; and all creation) is essential for sustaining creation. Instead of being at the centre of the universe without God and thus abusing creation, humankind, in both its individual and collective humanity, is called to act as God's agent in the world. Humanity, as well as each individual human being, plays the key and central role in this process.

As already outlined, according to the fathers of the Church, all creation participates in God through God's presence in all creation. One of the patristic voices that especially resonates in our time and in our considerations on the relationship to creation is that of Maximus the Confessor, who underlines that, through God's presence in all created things, God puts in place the basic principles of the existence of creation. Through these principles, he sets the limits of created things, as well as establishes the necessary balance among created things, through which life is sustained. Furthermore, God not only preserves and sustains individual creatures in their existence, he also guarantees their identity. By disturbing this balance, we act against God's principles. Human beings have a key role in this process of sustaining life. Maximus claims that we are "portions of God", therefore, it is the task and mandate of humanity to discern and understand the limits of created things and to preserve the balance among them in order to sustain life.²⁶ This is em-

²⁶ An English translation of Maximus's *Ambigua* can be found, e.g., in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert L. Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003). A key text of Maximus in this regard is "*Ambiguum* 7: On the Beginning and End of Rational Creatures" (PG 91:1068D-1101C), elaborating aspects of the quote from Gregory Naziansen that we are "a portion of God." Maximus underlines that "we are all connatural with God and

phased with equal vigour in the theology of all Christian confessional families. God does not act in the world independently from us. He has destined human beings to be at work with him and this vocation constitutes their excellence.²⁷

This echoes another idea that played a historic role in discerning nuances of the relationship between humanity and nature, and humanity and God. The Greek fathers, like Irenaeus (2nd c.), or Gregory Palamas (14th c.), argued that *imago Dei* is incomplete unless the whole creation is a constitutive part of it. Palamas especially, in his discussion of the *imago Dei*, asserts that humanity carries along with it²⁸ “every kind of creature, as he himself participates in everything and is also able to participate in the one who lies above everything, in order for the image of God to be completed”.²⁹

This is a clear indication of the *imago mundi* idea by which modern theologians attempt to redefine the human identity in light of the urgent climate crisis. If the image of God in humans cannot fully manifest without taking into account all the creatures, this clearly means that animals share in the salvation of the whole creation, and that they go to heaven. After all, this is the goal of the divine plan as it was finally realised through the paschal mystery: the salvation of the entire world

had our dwelling place (John 14:2) and foundation in God.” Maximus argues: “Since each person is a ‘portion of God’ by the logos of virtue in him . . . whoever abandons his own beginning . . . is irrationally swept along toward non-being... He enters a condition of unstable gyration and fearful disorder about his own defection by deliberately turning to what is worse” (p. 61).

²⁷ For a summary of key arguments of creation theology from a Protestant perspective see, e.g., Vischer, *Listening to Creation Groaning*, 128 ff.

²⁸ See Nikolaos Asproulis, “Animals and the Imago Dei: An Addendum to Christian Anthropology”, in Christina Nellist, ed. *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 33.

²⁹ Gregory Palamas, *Against Akindynos* 7,11,36.25-8, ed. Pan. Chrystou, vol. 3 (Thessaloniki, 1970), 488.

and not only of humans. Otherwise, the non-human part of creation would have been created in vain.

The communal understanding of the *imago Dei*, in terms of the common ontological (creature or animal) ground among all living, can be considered a much-neglected aspect. We have been familiar, for many centuries now, with a lifestyle that results in an inevitable break between human and nature, both in terms of practice and theory. If that is true, and in order to address the present climate crisis, a new model of anthropology is required beyond any human exceptionalism or problematic anthropomorphism studied to date, where attention is given to those parts of the *imago* that link humans to the rest of creation (e.g., animality) and not to those parts which deepen or stress their discontinuity. By redefining the image of God in a more inclusive way as “divine animality”, theology can provide an all-embracing anthropology that would account for the particular place and reception of animals – not only in our discourse but also in our practice.

One of possible learnings of the current ecological crisis may be that the difficulties we are facing are rooted in a confusion between Creator and creation, between the Offerer and offering, between the Donor and the gift. It might be that humanity has collectively come to expect too much from its own capacities and has failed to recognise the necessary balance between the different powers driving the world in which we live and, in removing the true God as a necessary point of reference in the cognitive scheme, has replaced him with another divinity and placed faith in the less traditional, abstract face of progress, prosperity, ever-growing material possession, power, or others. It might be that God allows the degradation of this world so that, in witnessing the sad sight of an ugly, empty, unfriendly and even hostile world, the human being may rediscover the relationship to God the Creator, and hence recover the fundamental truth of human existence.

Ecological crises may help in discovering that the mere acquisition of material things for their own sake does not give humankind a sense of meaning and purpose. Rather, it only breeds the desire to acquire more things. True meaning is found in a reality beyond the material world. The way we come to know this is through the self-evident beauty of creation, which points to something beyond us. The biblical idea of creation is firmly linked with the hope that has its basis in the experience of liberation. Therefore, it refers not only to the restoration of the original creation, but to its final completion. The experience of being freed from the power of sin leads to a hope of the completion of creation in glory.³⁰

It is this revelation that brings the heart to an act of praise, reducing humanity to awe and wonder in the beauty of God's creation and God's presence. Humans are a counterpart of God in the unfolding of the story of creation. Constitutive elements of this story are humans' accountability, reciprocity, and gratitude for the gift of creation.

In light of these reflections, it is obvious that care for creation is well rooted within spiritual language and within the history of Christianity. The sacramental life of churches points to a profound connection between the gifts of the earth and the gifts of God offered to humanity as fruits of the earth. To be good stewards, we desire that these gifts be accessible, not only to current generations, but also to those who come after us. Therefore, along with embracing the role as priests of creation, we are invited to be attentive to how creation should be cared for in its natural state, in order to enable our participation in the restoration of all things in Christ.

³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *La venue de Dieu – Eschatologie chrétienne*, trans. Joseph Hoffmann (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2000), 319 ff.

FAITH IN SOCIETY, CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD. WHAT VALUE FOR SOLIDARITY AND JUSTICE?

The ethos of Christian faith is based on the respect of creation and responsibility for creation. As expressed in the text from the early years of Christianity:

“Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. . . . Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. . . .

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world”.³¹

The ecological crisis we face is much more than the crises of the world or the crises of our mindset. It is a crisis stemming from our non-respect of the natural limits, a crisis of overconsumption stretching beyond the earth’s capacity. It is the consequence of our desire for more without looking at the cost. We have pursued the vision of economic growth without considering the consequences. It is the result of our mistaken relationship to nature and the world, where our wish for dominion in our relationship with nature prevailed over our appreciation of partnerships and participation. We have treated nature as no more than a source of raw materials and a waste disposal; we have claimed that our affluence is a just reward for our industry and effort, and not a gift from God to be shared justly between people and nations.

Against this background we believe that the solution to the current critical situation is not to be seen *merely* nor *primarily* in institutional

³¹ From the *Letter to Diognetus* (Nn. 5-6; Funk, 397–401), also known as the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* (Greek: Πρὸς Διόγνητον Ἐπιστολή), an example of Christian apologetics defending Christianity from its accusers. The Greek writer and recipient are not otherwise known; estimates of dating based on the language and other textual evidence have ranged from 130 CE (which would make it one of the earliest examples of apologetic literature), to the late 2nd century, with the latter often preferred in modern scholarship.

policies but rather in personal attitudes and in personal behaviour. Notwithstanding their necessity, science and technology will not solve the issue in of themselves. This is not to deny the relevance of public policies nor the important role of science and technology but rather to place them in a wider framework. Facing the ecological crisis and threat of climate change, we call for a new culture and new spirituality. Our consumption patterns are no longer sustainable. Our ever-increasing wish for more is no longer tenable. In the words of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I:

“It is apparent that the protection of the common good, of the integrity of the natural environment, is the common responsibility of all inhabitants of the earth. The contemporary categorical imperative for humankind is that we live without destroying the environment.”³²

We live in the midst of God’s great gifts. However, we have become blind to injustice and this has led to us being indifferent to our impact on nature and on each other. In acquiring economic wealth, we have caused damage to the very creation that sustains us. Both climate change and loss of natural biodiversity risk bringing chaos to life on earth. Further, we have not shared the wealth we have acquired equally. Poverty continues to exist alongside wealth in Europe as well as globally. We are called to witness to our faith in the Creator by working to transform these injustices.

Working for justice includes extending hospitality to those who suffer from injustice, conflicts and wars, and those who seek refuge. The challenges to increased migration and to welcoming refugees are connected with environmental issues: climate change is one of the factors that causes people to leave their homes. We must practice hospitality both towards our fellow human beings and towards other creatures. If

³² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, “Message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation”, 1 September 2020.

humans have caused the destruction of the habitats of other species, are we not called to restore and repair the damage we have done?

This calls for a shift from a dominantly individualist, egocentric, and utilitarian way of life that glorifies consumption, greed, and speculation and ignores the natural limits of the earth's capacity, refusing to take account of the world's finite resources, to the raising of the question, "What is enough?". What is enough for a good life? Is material prosperity enough of a guarantee for happiness and fulfilment? It is a call for a deliberative and sacrificial mode of existence that values voluntary restraint (*asceticism*), sharing, and solidarity (Luke 22:27: "I am among you as one who serves.").

CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION

The challenges the world is facing in the early 21st century are enormous. Many of them result from past deficiencies and past negligence. Many are new, resulting from the economic, societal, and technological developments humanity has achieved in recent decades. The far-flung impact and unexpected intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic for all the world's people should be wake-up call for each of us. The pandemic is not simply a new disease that will hopefully be prevented by a vaccination. It is a reminder of the world's fragility. We are much more fragile than we believe and more vulnerable than we have been able to admit. At the same time, the pandemic reveals how dependent we are on each other as individuals, as well as on countries and communities. No country of the world can be isolated from the rapidly-spreading COVID-19 virus. No country in the world is in a position to be healed on its own. The ecological crisis has not hit the minds and existence of most people with the same urgency as the COVID-19 pandemic has. Nevertheless, the world is as little prepared to face the climate and ecological crisis as it has been with the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scope and impact of the intensity of the gradually developing ecological crisis may, at least in some world regions, reach similar levels as those we've seen from the impact of COVID-19. The fragility and vulnerability of human existence, as well as our dependency on the actions of one another, will

be tested with the climate and ecological crisis as equally as they have been tested with the pandemic.

The last decades have increasingly brought to our door the challenge of an ecological crisis that includes the threat of climate change, environmental degradation, and growing pollution. By acknowledging and better understanding the reasons for this crisis, we see that the devastation of the earth's environment and climate is one that cannot be solved by economic and technological processes alone. The crisis is as much an ethical and spiritual one as it is economic and technological.

As expressed in the words of the message of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in 2016:

“It is clear that the present-day ecological crisis is due to spiritual and moral causes. Its roots are connected with greed, avarice and egoism, which lead to the thoughtless use of natural resources, the filling of the atmosphere with damaging pollutants, and to climate change. The Christian response to the problem demands repentance for the abuses, an ascetic frame of mind as an antidote to overconsumption, and at the same time a cultivation of the consciousness that man is a “steward” and not a possessor of creation. The Church never ceases to emphasise that future generations also have a right to the natural resources that the Creator has given us.”³³

For a number of years, we have witnessed an unprecedented rising interest from churches and individual Christians in articulating responses of faith to ecological challenges. Numerous theological insights helping to deepen the theology of creation in many respects have been received with appreciation. Based on the rich theology and tradition (incarnational theology, asceticism, eucharistic ethos, image of God, the

³³ Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, § 8, Pentecost 2016.

task of human beings as priests of creation, etc.), churches, in many respects, are supporting people in dealing with the tremendous change humanity has to go through, while at the same time offering concrete ideas on how and why faith really matters in environmental issues.

Reference to creation, through which Christian language on ecological concerns is framed, can sometimes be taken as a reference that puts undue emphasis on the past, which is the reference to the particular moment in the history of the universe that can be identified with cosmological theory. In reality, the theological concept of creation is not related to cosmological theories but to ontology. Creation is a story of continuation. At the same time, it is an outline of the relationship between human beings and is radically different from the materiality of physical existence.

An emphasis on cultivating the relationship to what is ontologically different often leads to the distortion of the theological concept of eschatology. The cultivation of the relationship of what is ontologically different is then misplaced by focusing on the relationship to what is different in perception of time, to what will be different in the future. Eschatology is often seen as a theory of what will happen beyond our existing time horizon. The biblical story of creation and God's incarnation and redemption mutually overlap to outline a concept of eschatology that is much richer than any theories of what will happen after the physical death of the mortal body. What occurs beyond our timeline only covers one part of eschatology. The attraction to get closer to the mystery of metaphysics and to discern what happens beyond the time horizon often moves our attention from that part of eschatology that emphasises the relationship to what is already radically and ontologically different. Realised eschatology is predominantly characterised by what unfolds in the here and now. To paraphrase, it spells out God's presence in us and around us.

Realised eschatology is an unavoidable concept in the unravelling of the theological understanding of Christian engagement for a sustainable future. It includes a sense of gratitude for the gift of creation and the acknowledgment of responsibility for its sustenance, and also includes the reaching for sacramental relationship that offers the world and its fruits something that is beyond human capacity. At the same time, it acknowledges our duty to preserve what we have for future generations. Realised eschatology offers the foundation that outlines the Church's engagement with the world, rather than limiting her action and interest to what happens after our physical existence. As a member of the world's community, the Church has the moral duty to raise her voice for the protection of the world and the environment, and to gather together all society in order to achieve a sustainable future for the coming generations. The concept of time, in which eternity unfolds not at the end of time but moves in parallel with the continuity of time, calls for Christians to bring meaningful action on care for creation in any given moment. It is an expression of hope that not only puts its trust in the future but decides its quality in the here and now. It is an expression of hope that tells us our actions and our engagement make sense, even if the world around might try to convince us of the contrary.

Christian eschatological vision invites everyone to work for the preparation of the world today and not to wait until tomorrow. In this sense, theological ecology does not merely refer to the development of an ecological awareness or to the response to ecological problems on the basis of the principles of Christian anthropology and cosmology. Instead, it involves the renewal of the whole creation in Christ, just as this is realised and experienced in the Holy Eucharist, which is an image and foretaste of the eschatological fullness of the Divine Economy in the doxological wholeness and luminous splendour of the heavenly kingdom.

From this it is clear that the growing interest of churches for the protection of creation does not arise from a reaction to, or as a result of, the contemporary ecological crisis. This engagement is an expression of core biblical principles. The ecological activities of churches are an expression of Christian anthropology and cosmology, and of the eucharistic worldview and treatment of creation, along with the spirit of asceticism as the basis for understanding the reason for and response to the ecological crisis. That means that, as Christians, we have to be more active in our lives.

CONCLUSIONS

The Church has a role to play in response to the ecological challenges of 21st century. The gospel demonstrates that the churches have an important message to contribute to climate work and can offer ethical reflections on changing our lifestyles. Therefore, it is of great importance that the Church across the world collaborate in word and action in pointing to sustainable, ecological, social and spiritual ways of living. Not least by prayer and worship that focus more on nature and creation. The Church has a prophetic call to counteract social and ecological despair and injustice in the world. The prophetic call also entails working for justice, both locally and in the world, especially for those most marginalised, those living in poverty, and the ethnic groups and societies that are most often those overwhelmed by the consequences of climate change. The work of the Church in this way expresses the caritative responsibility held by the Church and Christians. It is an illusion to view care for marginalised people and care for the rest of creation as opposites. We cannot love people while despising the nature and creation we came from and are a part of:

“For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage

to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19-21).

Sustainability for people and societies presupposes sustainability for nature and the world that is our earthly home. This is a message that already exists in Christianity, but one that the Church at times does not see. Let the Church join the frontrunners in fighting for a sustainable future.

Our ambition is to contribute to these efforts. We believe an additional chapter in theological handbooks, or a course in theological curricula, is not an efficient response to climate change. What is needed is a bold and comprehensive theological vision that attempts to interpret the basic doctrines of Christianity (incarnation, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.) through an *ecological* perspective, through a perspective that is based on an inclusive anthropocentric, not anthropomonistic, understanding of reality, one that at the same time takes scientific knowledge into account and one that stresses the close interdependence of humanity with the rest of the cosmos, and a fresh interpretation of the divine plan for salvation in a way that is relevant to our context and era.

B

**FROM A GREEN DEAL
TO A GREEN ECONOMY**

THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL EXAMINED

The European Commission introduces the European Green Deal (EGD) as one of the EU flagship initiatives with following words:

“Climate change and environmental degradation are an existential threat to Europe and the world. To overcome these challenges, the European Green Deal will transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, ensuring:

- no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050
- economic growth decoupled from resource use
- no person and no place left behind.

The European Green Deal is also our lifeline out of the COVID-19 pandemic. One third of the 1.8 trillion euro investments from the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan, and the EU’s seven-year budget will finance the European Green Deal.”³⁴

The Conference of European Churches welcomes the policy proposals in the EGD, which is an ambitious programme and necessary step in the right direction. However, at the same time, we raise the question of whether the economy outlined under the EGD would indeed deliver on aiming to be a truly green and just economy. Will the transformation

³⁴ European Commission, “A European Green Deal: Striving to Be the First Climate-Neutral Continent”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

suggested by the EGD be sufficient to stem the tide: climate change causing droughts, forest fires, floods, hurricanes, increased scale and rate of biodiversity loss and increasing air, water, and soil pollution due to overconsumption, particularly in the developed nations? Will it really transform the dominant economic model aimed at growth into a circular, zero-carbon, fossil-free economy? Will it really do so in such a way that “no person and no place [is] left behind”, and that effectively reduces the growing inequality and, indeed, poverty? Will these policies take on board global solidarity, building bridges between the northern and southern hemispheres? Will they incorporate the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

Why would this be a concern for the churches? Churches are called to care for God’s creation, to be good stewards and caretakers, and are increasingly concerned over the degradation of nature, including continuing climate change and loss of biodiversity. We need to be aware that we are only part of a *vulnerable* ecological network, and that if we harm other parts of this network, we are ultimately harming ourselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us firmly about our often-neglected vulnerability.

If climate change is not curbed soon in large parts of the world, annual average temperatures will rise to such an extent that agriculture – and therefore human life – in many areas would become nearly impossible. Moreover, our brothers and sisters in the southern hemisphere – the poorest – would be hit most by its consequences, which include loss of habitat, climate-induced migration, the raising of security concerns, disruption of the cohesion and functioning of society, etc. As people of faith, we are called to love our neighbours, particularly those who are marginalised and face poverty, far and near. Therefore, concerns related to the environment raise numerous questions for churches in Europe, especially in the light of our vision of future, justice, and a sustainable world.

The present document argues that we need to move to a truly sustainable economy and give this transformation a “soul” by offering a reflection based on the emerging green theology. Our ambition is to contribute to efforts to develop *a narrative of a sustainable future* and to answer the question: What do we mean by a sustainable future? Against the above background we offer a reflection on the EGD from a churches’ perspective. From that perspective the emphasis needs to be on using key Christian concepts such as justice, solidarity, and care for creation, as well as key findings drawn from Jewish-Christian tradition developed over the centuries. The challenge is to create a narrative that makes sense in both worlds, the world of policy and the world of theology embedded in society. Therefore, our argumentation as well as vocabulary needs to be theologically sound and, at the same time, make sense in a secular context.

The EGD is an ambitious programme. We recognise that an enormous amount of work has already gone into the different policy strands, and we offer our comments as those who share a vision for a more just and sustainable Europe. The EGD, presented by the European Commission in December 2019 entails a comprehensive and detailed plan for transition of the European economy and society to a more sustainable future. The bar is set high; however, the successful implementation of the Green Deal will depend on the EU member states. EU President Ursula von der Leyen’s State of the Union Address on 16 September 2020 confirmed that the ambitions have not been reduced in face of the COVID-19 crisis.

The EGD aims not only at addressing the environmental agenda. Achieving a sustainable future is to be done through a modernisation of the EU economy. This should be achieved through transforming the current economy into a more circular economy, which – since it leaves

no one behind – is at the same time a just economy.³⁵ Such an economy would be resource efficient, make use of clean and affordable energy, be characterised by zero pollution, and be toxic free. It would result in fair, healthy, and environmentally-friendly agriculture and would preserve and restore ecosystems and biodiversity. At the same time, these transformative green policies would be part of the EU implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The EGD outlines a long list of policy instruments aimed at achieving these goals, including a European Climate Law setting CO₂ reduction targets for 2030–2050, a Circular Economy Action Plan, a Zero Pollution Action Plan, and others. It aims at mainstreaming sustainability in all EU policies. The key conclusion is that recovery, after the pandemic is under control, cannot consist in a return to business as usual. The pandemic demonstrated how the balance between humans and nature has been disrupted. At the same time, it looks like this pandemic will stay with us for a long time. This means we may need to live with its impact and build resistance against possible future pandemics and other natural disasters, climate change, resource depletion, and scarcity. Yet the pandemic also demonstrated that it is possible to reduce travel substantially and increase the use of new communication technologies such as online videoconferencing tools. There is a real challenge in the post-coronavirus recovery avoidance of “going back to normal”, resulting in continuing or even increasing pollution, for example in the avia-

³⁵ Proposals for a Green New Deal have been developed earlier of course by the Green New Deal for Europe, an international campaign for a just and democratic transition to a sustainable Europe. Founded in 2019 by the Democracy in Europe Movement, the Green New Deal for Europe aims to unite Europe’s communities, unions, parties, and activists behind a shared vision of ecological justice. See *Blueprint: For Europe’s Just Transition*, 2nd edition, Green New Deal for Europe, December 2019, <https://report.gndforeurope.com>.

tion industry. All this calls for a real transformation of economic, social, health, and ecological policies.

There is a need for a new balance and more balanced policies. This re-emphasises the need to constructively and critically assess the EGD. The package indeed contributes towards a transition to a low-carbon economy, although one may wonder whether it goes far enough. All this requires a strong voice from the European churches advocating for a fair and sustainable economy truly based on the prudential principle. Major areas of the EGD that are the focal points of our concerns and are further elaborated in this document include:

- Just transition to circular and green economy, including leaving no one behind
- Lifestyle, consumerism, and sufficiency
- How can there be an infinite economic growth based on extraction of resources from and commodification of the earth?
- An excessive ecological footprint and overconsumption.

Questions:

- What does climate change mean to you?
- Is there evidence of a changing climate in your area or in your country?
- How do you see the loss of biodiversity in relation to the stewardship of creation?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic offered us any ideas how we might better understand our vulnerability?
- Is the European Green Deal something that invites you to think anew? Or to do certain things differently?
- Is the European Green Deal an inspiration for you? Does the deal cover all relevant areas to be addressed in pursuing the vision of a sustainable future?

JUST TRANSITION

Leaving no one behind

Priority needs to be given to the intention stated in the EGD, *to leave no one behind*. However, that may be rather difficult to implement. We need to draw attention to the social-economic impact of a green transformation, to people losing jobs in the course of the transformation, and to the question of how the transformation could be managed in such a way that it will be beneficial for everyone.

In this regard, the effort of the European Commission to engage EU citizens into the EGD is welcomed. The main instrument serving this aim is the European Climate Pact (ECP), which aims to motivate individuals to act and contribute to achieve the EGD objectives, including with awareness raising and education on climate change.³⁶ The ECP is important not only as a sign of the EU action on climate change but also as recognition that, for an effective management of climate, laws and policies alone will not be enough. It is a recognition of the call that churches, faith-based organisations, and many civil society organisations have been making for a long time: the climate crisis has an impact on our daily life, on the life of every individual; and that in order to respond to climate change effectively, our everyday choices matter. We cannot

³⁶ European Climate Pact, European Commission, December 2020, https://europa.eu/climate-pact/index_en.

respond to climate change effectively without engaging citizens and winning public support.

In engaging citizens it is not possible to avoid the problem of energy poverty. Thirty million Europeans were unable to adequately heat their homes in 2019.³⁷ The problem has become more pressing in the light of the pandemic and the huge increases in the price of gas that have further exacerbated the problem of energy poverty. In this context, CEC Member Churches join with those demanding that the EU develop a political strategy to give energy poverty more attention and a higher priority to lift millions of Europeans out of this situation. Such an endeavour requires resolute action in its broadest sense, from the EU, to the national and the local levels.

Encouraging citizens to take a stand against the deterioration of the environment and against climate change is not only a protection against the negative effects of climate change and a protection against energy scarcity. It also promotes greater transparency, participation, joint decision-making, and public awareness. In a number of places in Europe this is an opportunity for the creation of local energy communities. The strengthening of such communities both at national and European levels should be considered in future renewable energy projects in order to strengthen the goal of “no person and no place left behind”, which is of major significance in the concept of the EGD.

It is obvious that whatever option is chosen for energy production, the goal must be twofold: (1) access for everyone to affordable warmth, especially in times of crisis and high fuel costs, and (2) commitment to net zero carbon emissions.

An integral part of a green transition must be the consideration of how to reduce unemployment across Europe. Therefore, we recommend

³⁷ *Europe Needs a Political Strategy to End Energy Poverty*, Jacques Delors Institute, 2 February 2021, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/europe-needs-a-political-strategy-to-end-energy-poverty>.

that incentives for the European production of renewable energy systems be provided, to help meet energy needs by utilising as many local resources and local labour as possible.

Questions:

- How is renewable energy being developed in your community or country and how is it benefitting your local community?
- Is energy poverty an issue on your community?
- How should the motivation of individuals be reinforced for their action on the environmental crisis?

The European Green Deal and renewable energy

The EGD embraces the concept of a Just Energy Transition. The transition must, according to the document, “put people first, and pay attention to the regions, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges”. The EGD’s focus on addressing energy poverty aims to address economic inequalities. However, the stated ambition is to *prevent the increase of inequalities* due to EGD measures. Should not the aim rather be *to end existing inequalities*?

The EU proposes a Just Transition Mechanism and a Fund that will support coal-dependent regions in the transition away from coal and support re-skilling and the diversification of the economy. Of the COVID-19 recovery fund agreed by the European Council in July 2021, 10 billion euros was allocated to the Just Transition Fund, adding to the 7,5 billion euros agreed before the pandemic. We welcome the focus on sustainable and labour-intensive economic activities, which is also positive and can thus contribute to fulfilling SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth). Some criticise the proposed mechanism for not being effective enough, as only a minority of the member states actually have plans for phasing out coal production by 2030.

There has been an intensive discussion within the EU as to what may be considered “clean energy”. The most critical part of the EU Taxonomy Regulation,³⁸ which assesses sources of energy from the perspective of sustainable development, has been the evaluation of gas and nuclear energy. In February 2022, the European Commission agreed to list gas as a transitional source of energy, to be phased out as low carbon alternatives become available and at the latest by 2035. Until 2035 further investments into gas power stations that conform to strict limits on CO₂ emission will be permitted. According to the European Commission investments into nuclear energy will be considered as green if they are authorised by competent authorities by 2045 for construction of new blocks and by 2040 for updating already operational blocks. All states producing nuclear energy are requested to have by 2050 in their territory operational facilities for the disposal of low and intermediate-level waste streams, with a plan in place for a high-level waste disposal facility with notable progress towards its realisation.

Nuclear energy is a low carbon source of energy when compared to coal, oil, or gas and has provided a reliable source of electricity in many European countries for a generation. While taking note of the EU decision, there are a number of concerns to address. First, the supply of nuclear fuels such as uranium is limited and the processes by which it is enriched for use in reactors is complex and closely related to the production of weapons-grade material. Second, the construction and decommissioning of nuclear power plants is complex and expensive and is now far more expensive than new wind or solar power. Third, the decommissioning of nuclear power plants and the treatment of nuclear waste are

³⁸ The EU taxonomy is a classification system, establishing a list of environmentally sustainable economic activities. It plays an important role helping the EU scale up sustainable investment and implement the EGD. The Taxonomy Regulation entered into force on 12 July 2020. It establishes the basis for the EU classification by setting out four overarching conditions that an economic activity has to meet in order to qualify as environmentally sustainable.

both highly challenging and eye watering expensive, if they can be achieved successfully at all. Across Europe there are redundant nuclear power stations, some decades old, awaiting decommissioning, and stores of nuclear waste awaiting proper treatment and storage to make them safe, if they can be made safe at all. Fourth, the connection between civil nuclear power and nuclear weapons is historically close but often hidden from view by governments. A civil nuclear programme is essential to maintain a nuclear deterrent, one reason why some governments are keen to continue with nuclear power in the energy mix.³⁹ The use of nuclear energy has therefore been a hot discussion theme for churches in Europe for some time already. There are churches in Europe with a clear position against the use of nuclear energy. There are others, not expressing a position publicly. And there are also those inclined to accept that carbon-induced climate change is the major threat for a sustainable future, therefore urgent decarbonising and keeping energy security would justify the use of transitory energy systems allowing the fastest possible abandoning of coal.

Against this background is the continuing problem of fossil fuel subsidies not only in the EU, but also on a global scale. Fossil fuel subsidies have increased since 2015 in 11 member states and now comprise around 30 percent of total energy subsidies in the EU. In 2020, they amounted to 52 billion euros and to 56 billion euros in 2019.⁴⁰ There are also the tensions between stimulating alternative energy and preserving nature/biodiversity. Take for example the fact that dams built to generate

³⁹ The close links between the UK's civil nuclear programme and nuclear weapons has been researched by the University of Sussex. See Tom Furnival-Adams, "Research Shows Links Between Civil and Military Nuclear in UK", University of Sussex, 24 October 2017, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/42283>.

⁴⁰ *State of the Energy Union 2021 – Contributing to the European Green Deal and the Union's Recovery*, European Commission, Brussels, 26 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/default/files/state_of_the_energy_union_report_2021.pdf.

hydroelectricity may form barriers for fish to swim upstream to hatch their eggs, or the construction of windmills right in the path of migrating birds can cause collisions with these windmills. So careful study of the natural environment (included in an Environmental Impact Assessment) must be carried out before implementing such projects.

Yet another example of a dilemma is that capture and storage of CO₂ (CCS) and wind and solar energy are competing for subsidies. In the Netherlands for example, large industrial companies in the harbour of Rotterdam are applying for subsidies from the government for CCS, but these come from the same fund as subsidies for wind and solar energy. This may reduce opportunities to develop alternative sustainable energy sources. We believe that CCS may have a role in certain industries, but this has not yet been demonstrated at a large scale and may be a diversion. It is far simpler wherever possible to stop burning oil and coal and gas than to try and bury the waste products. Prevention of emissions should be prioritised above storage. The latter may even entail the risk that emissions are simply being continued instead of being reduced.

Last but not least, there is the issue of rare metals such as lithium, cobalt, coltan etc. that are needed for our energy transition (windmills, solar panels, batteries), resources which are finite and exhaustible. Above all these are mostly mined in the southern hemisphere for the benefit of the northern hemisphere. It seems that the new technological revolution – like the previous industrial one – may be once more at the cost of the peoples in the South. Obviously, this is of concern to the churches arguing for a right sharing of resources.

Questions:

- How is the energy transition affecting existing inequalities?
- What do you think about subsidies for fossil fuel?
- Is nuclear power a threat, an opportunity, or a necessary intermediary on the way to fully renewable energy resources?

**LIFESTYLE, CONSUMERISM,
AND SUFFICIENCY. WHAT IS ENOUGH
FOR A LIFE IN DIGNITY?**

We, the citizens of Europe, need to adopt a different lifestyle in order to reduce air, water, and soil pollution, the consumption of natural resources, and our ecological footprint. The EGD is an ambitious initiative undertaken by the EU, but by themselves policies are not enough, to the extent that they mainly propose measures and strategies to be taken by national governments. But as history and every-day life teaches us, one cannot change the lifestyle of the people by simply providing certain better political or moral principles. Education has a vital role.

The future of the planet is of critical importance, yet some of the proposed measures are outdated or fail to address the urgency of the problems. What the churches – as spiritual centres in our society – may contribute, is to offer (through education, preaching, concrete examples of good practices) the vision of a different lifestyle that takes seriously the interdependence between human beings and all of creation.

In its previous documents the Conference of European Churches emphasised the need to raise awareness about choosing a different lifestyle. Guiding people towards a sustainable way of life, to the “good life”, is a key concern that the Bible speaks about. In order to create

such a more responsible awareness about consumption, the EU needs to build effective cooperation with churches, religious communities, and engaged parts of civil society. Christian principles, values, and lifestyles do not primarily rely on material wealth, comfort, and the ambition to become rich. Churches have the potential to be relevant partners in the quest for an ecological and social transformation in Europe.

A necessary step on the way is to admit that for a long time we have pursued the vision of economic growth without considering the consequences. We have treated nature simply as a source of raw materials and as a sink for our wastes; we have claimed that our affluence is a just reward for our industry and effort and not a gift from God to be shared justly between people and nations.

We live in the midst of bountiful resources. However, we have become blind to injustice and this has led us to be indifferent to our impact on nature and on each other. In acquiring economic wealth, we have caused damage to the environment that sustains us. Both climate change and loss of natural biodiversity risk bringing chaos to life on earth. The earth and the environment around us need to be protected and not treated as a resource to be plundered.

And we have not shared equally the wealth we have acquired. Within countries across Europe and around the world there are great and systematic inequalities of wealth. Poverty exists alongside affluence within communities at every geographical scale.

This calls for a shift from a dominant, individualist, and utilitarian way of life that glorifies consumption, greed, and speculation without acknowledging natural limits or even asking the question “What is enough?”, to a more deliberative mode of existence that values voluntary restraint, sharing, and solidarity. An analysis of what “justice” means, “just transition mechanisms”, and how to live within planetary boundaries, is seriously lacking in the EGD document. These concerns are mentioned, but not sufficiently worked out. To reduce economic

disparities the ambition needs to be higher. Similarly, the EGD does not dig sufficiently deep into global inequality, though climate justice, ecological justice, and economic justice are global issues.

What does this mean in practice?

- Uncontrolled economic growth is blind to economic inequality and the ecological damage it creates and cannot be sustained; we must question the purpose and direction of the kind of economic system we have created.
- We can design an alternative economy that will share wealth more equally within countries, across Europe, and in the wider world.
- We can share economic power more justly between men, women, people of different ages and abilities or disabilities, and minority groups.
- We can design an economy that will not put at risk the rights of future generations; an economy that does not degrade or impoverish creation but enriches it. We can create a caring economy.
- We can live without wanting more and more. We can be more assertive about accepting natural limits to make this part of our life in the 21st century.
- We can distinguish between what we really need for life and what is not necessary: sufficiency and the question “What is enough?” should drive our consideration, not the maximisation of profit and pleasure.
- Consumerism leads to an overproduction of materials, products, and waste. Too much food is wasted while in other parts of the world food is lacking and thousands die from hunger or malnutrition every day. Should we not develop a *culture of caring* rather than a *culture of consuming*?

Questions:

- What does a “good life” mean to you and how does it look in a Christian perspective?
- How does increasing wealth fit into your idea of a “good life”?
- What lifestyle changes do you think are necessary to care for creation and what are the barriers against achieving them?
- How can churches inspire people to make such lifestyle changes?

CAN THERE BE INFINITE ECONOMIC GROWTH?

**TO WHAT EXTENT IS WELLBEING AND PROSPERITY
CORRELATED WITH GROWTH IN MATERIAL
POSSESSION?**

Biblical perspective

Although it cannot be said that there is something like a “Christian economy”, reading the Bible we find many prophets – as well as Christ himself – emphasising the need for justice, compassion, solidarity, and sharing of natural resources as given by God to all. Theological considerations on economy are guided by an unmistakable biblical message outlining economy in the context of protection of the vulnerable and efforts for the good of community as a whole.

The Old Testament offers clear examples of a protest against economic systems that oppress people and make it acceptable to take advantage of the weaker ones. Many of the prophets (e.g., Hosea, Micha, Isaiah, Jeremiah) underline the importance of justice when it comes to economic systems. The prophet Amos offers examples of an economy where small farmers, such as Amos himself, lost property and land to money loan sharks and risked being sold as slaves to pay off their debt

(Amos 2:6-7). Taking advantage of the economic system for one's personal economic gain ruins the less fortunate and destroys social relations in a society. Amos puts forward a connection between the economic and political systems and the mental and spiritual structures that oppressive or unjust systems allow. Amos is not encouraging an increase in spirituality but rather an increase in justice – both individually and in society (Amos 5:7-24).

If we apply some of the perspectives from the teachings of the Bible to the situation in Europe today, the first thing that springs to mind is the value of living creatures (both human and animal) in contrast to economic growth. An economic system that leads to exclusion and inequality and keeps people stuck in an unsustainable way of life is an unhealthy system that ends up destructing instead of building up. Many people in Europe are being left behind when it comes to their jobs, housing, income, social standing, opportunities and much more. Nature too is under pressure and at risk of being left behind or even ruined. The only measuring stick used is that of economic growth and market value. People that are already marginalised are at risk of being left behind to such an extent that they feel they no longer even matter. The message of the Bible teaches us the value of all creation and God leaves no one behind when it comes to sharing his love.

Another biblical perspective about debt and loan sharks calls to attention the problem of the power of profit over humans and nature, a problem to which current policies do not offer a sufficient solution. The financial crisis of 2008 reminded us of the shortcomings of a system dictated by debt and indebtedness because with debt we accept the rule of money over individuals and society. The problem with this is the way we view humans: indebtedness is actually a denial of the principle of people coming first. In the dominant economic model a human being is reduced to labourer or consumer only.

In cases like this, Amos and the other prophets protesting against unjust economic systems come to mind. They lived at a time of great socio-economic changes, as do we, and they responded by defending personal integrity and protesting against greed and abuse. The church today must also protest on behalf of the marginalised of creation – both human beings and other creatures, who suffer from an abusive and destructive economic system.

Questions:

- What does economic justice and equality mean to you?
- How has economic growth benefited your community or country and how has the benefits been shared?
- How has economic growth affected inequalities in your country?

Faith in unlimited growth of the economy. Decoupling growth from the growing use of natural resources.

The EGD is a welcome step forward. But does it represent a truly sustainable economy? Will it create a European economy that is both less damaging to the natural environment and shares wealth more equitably within and between nations (northern and southern hemisphere)? To be specific, will the EGD create:

- A carbon-free economy geared towards minimum pollution and waste reduction?
- An economy aiming to decouple growth from ecological pressure?
- An economy designed for selective growth, favouring green sectors over and above polluting ones?
- A more balanced, zero-growth economy?
- A circular economy?

Or an economy that incorporates dimensions of all of the above?

The EGD does not question the economic growth paradigm itself but suggests that it is possible to decouple economic growth from carbon emissions. Is this realistic? The EGD mentions that from 1970 to 2017 the annual extraction of raw materials tripled and continues to grow. When it comes to carbon emission, EU figures show that EU emissions have decreased by 24 percent from 1990 to 2019, while the EU economy grew by 60 percent. For some, this decoupling of economic growth from carbon emissions is sufficient ground to establish that the model of economy based on growth is sound and compatible with the vision of a sustainable future. Is it indeed so?

It has been suggested that some positive forms of economic activity – for example, ecological or organic agriculture, renewable energy production, health care, and education – would grow selectively and that more negative forms of economic activity would shrink or disappear altogether. A recent publication by the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) argues, however, that there is no empirical evidence that decoupling ecological pressure from growth works.⁴¹ Absolute decoupling of economic growth from resource use would not be possible on a world-wide scale. According to this study human consumption of natural resources (fish, livestock, plants and trees, metals, minerals, fossil fuels) was 50 million metric tons per year in 2000, 70 billion tons in 2020 and, if the trend continues, will be 180 billion tons in 2050. Even applying all the best practices possible, it would still be 95 billion metric tons in 2050. This means that we are facing massive depletion of natural resources and ecosystems that will eventually collapse on a large scale.

That decoupling may not work is partly due a number of factors such as problem-shifting, rebound effects, insufficient innovative technologi-

⁴¹ *Decoupling Debunked – Evidence and Arguments Against Green Growth as a Sole Strategy for Sustainability*, European Environmental Bureau, 8 July 2019, <https://eeb.org/library/decoupling-debunked>.

cal change, and the limited potential of recycling. An example of problem-shifting: producing more electric cars shifts the problem from extracting fossil fuels to extracting copper, cobalt and rare metals such as lithium. As for the limited potential of recycling, the report signals that the recycling rates are currently quite low and recovery processes still require significant amounts of energy. This urgently needs to be addressed by adequate policies.

An alternative approach would be to downscale economic production and consumption in the wealthiest countries and to introduce sufficiency-oriented policies. Examples of such alternative sufficiency policies are movements such as transition towns, eco villages, slow cities, social and solidarity economics, movements which suggest that “more is not always better and enough can be plenty”.

“Sufficiency” does not mean “sacrifice” resulting in unemployment, inequality and poverty, but rather choosing a fair economy which remains within the carrying capacities of our biosphere. “Living well within the planet’s ecological limits.” This requires a different type of decoupling: that of prosperity and “the good life” from economic growth. In order to do so, we will need a new conceptual toolbox to assist policymakers in developing new ways in this “crisis of imagination”.

Our economy and model of prosperity is based on the extraction of raw materials from the earth. Material possession has become the marker of our wealth and our achievements. A drive to consume for the sake of consumption, for an illusion of material prosperity accompanied by blindness to the long-term consequences of our actions have become part of our way of life. Growth for growth’s sake must be challenged as an ideology.

In outlining a vision of a sustainable future, we have to question not only the consequences of this drive for prosperity but address basic assumptions on which the dominant vision of prosperity is founded:

infinite growth and the exploitation of the earth. Or to put it in the words of another CEC publication in this field: can we create an economy which “moves beyond prosperity” and towards well-being for all – human beings and our fellow creatures?⁴²

A major concern is the dependence of governments on the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the measure of economic success. The question of using economic indicators, in particular the GDP, as an overall indicator of progress in society has recently become a subject of intensive studies. Many of them raised doubts and critiques about the role given to it. Some of these studies proposed alternative approaches, as for example a complex set of indicators, that would pull together economic, social, and ecological parameters. Others suggested using as a measure of good life an indicator of “happiness” instead of the GDP. All these reflect growing dissatisfaction with the role of the GDP as a universal indicator of good life. On the other hand, none of the measuring concepts suggested so far is in a position to compete with the “simplicity” of the meaning hidden behind the GDP and its assumption that it is economy that provides the core for satisfying all human needs.

An example is Rutger Hoekstra⁴³ who argues that the GDP is a poor measure, particularly where concepts such as wellbeing and sustainability are taken into account. Although many alternative ways to measure progress have been proposed in the past fifty years, the GDP is still dominant. A better measure should also include good health and leisure, as well as negative issues such as inequality and ecological damage. Only in this way, Hoekstra argues, can we actually measure “progress”. Similar findings were stressed by Martin Kopp in “A Christian Ques-

⁴² P. Pavlovic, ed., *Beyond Prosperity: European Economic Governance as a Dialogue between Theology, Economics and Politics*, CEC 4 (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2017).

⁴³ R. Hoekstra, *Replacing GDP by 2030: Towards a Common Language for the Well-being and Sustainability Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

tioning of Continued Economic Growth”,⁴⁴ where he raises the following fundamental questions related to economic growth:

- Growth of what?
- To what end?
- For whom?
- How?
- Growth until when?

Other economists are asking similar questions. Examples include Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity Without Growth*; Manfred Max-Neef and Philip B. Smith’s *Economics Unmasked*; Kate Raworth’s *Doughnut Economics*; and Rutger Bregman’s *Utopia for Realists*.⁴⁵

One of the difficulties of the current dominant economic model is that of “virtual”, or “illusionary” financial growth. Inflated market values without real substance behind them have increasingly become a source of financial bubbles and volatility in the global financial system. World markets have in many instances lost connection with the natural world. Financial speculation, especially with natural resources and food products, may have a disastrous impact on populations in different parts of the world, in particular on those most vulnerable. The availability of natural resources and food products is limited. Their scarcity may decide life and death for people, families and communities living around the world. Many indigenous communities and rural communities are bound

⁴⁴ M. Kopp, “A Christian Questioning of Continued Economic Growth” (PhD diss., to be published).

⁴⁵ See, e.g., T. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009); Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: And How We Can Get There*, trans. Elizabeth Manton (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017); Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think like a 21st Century Economist* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017); and Manfred Max-Neef and Philip B. Smith, *Economics Unmasked: From Power and Greed to Compassion and the Common Good* (Totnes, UK: Green Books, 2011).

to their territories by history, traditions and culture. Millions of poor and underprivileged live in the outskirts of the cities and big agglomerations. Poverty, hunger, and starvation are their daily reality. Scarcity in terms of basic needs in many cases means suffering on an immense scale. Financial speculations do not take this into the equation and can cause immense price fluctuations resulting in scarcity and famine, while at the same time leading to adverse social effects including rising criminality, mass migration, ethnic tensions, social conflicts, and even armed conflicts. This is the flip side of the coin that is presented to the people as economic “growth”.

Questions:

- What do you understand by “sustainable economy” and how do we achieve it?
- How, if it is possible, can economic growth and ecological safety go hand in hand?
- Can there really be something like “sustainable growth”?
- What do you consider important for the wellbeing and sustainability of your community?
- How can it be achieved?

OUR CONSUMPTION AND ECOLOGICAL DEBT

Where does our prosperity come from?

Only immense debts have kept economic “growth” functioning. State debts have reached astronomic levels that could not possibly be paid off by any normal economic cycle or by this generation. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the problem. The prosperity that much of the world enjoys has been realised at the cost of a serious monetary and ecological debt. Ecological, or environmental debt in most cases refers to the accumulation of past environmental impacts of natural resource depletion and environmental degradation, a debt owed to future generations.

Ecological debt is not just about the counting of costs – of a monetary or immaterial nature – incurred by the natural environment by the way of life of past generations. It also is an indicator of the responsibility of the current generations for environmental costs that have been shifted to, and will need to be faced by, future generations. The concept of ecological debt was first introduced in 1985. Ecological footprint tries to measure the eco-capacity of Earth, and whether our consumption is exceeding the resources of our planet. Ecological debt is closely linked with the concept of ecological footprint that measures the eco-capacity

of Earth and whether our consumption is proportional to the resources of the planet. There is no generally accepted definition of ecological debt and approaches to the concept may differ. The Oxford Climate Society defines ecological debt “as the level of resource consumption and waste discharge by a population which is in excess of locally sustainable natural production and assimilative capacity”.⁴⁶ Another approach considers ecological debt as the measure of use of natural resources in the “developed world” against the “lesser-developed” countries. Here, the ecological debt is the debt of the “developed world” over against the “lesser developed” parts of our world.

Ecological debt can also acknowledge our responsibility to future generations and other parts of the world. In the 2021 report *The Economics of Biodiversity*,⁴⁷ the “devastating costs” of our prosperity to the ecosystems that provide humanity with food, water, and clean air are explored. The study concludes that radical global changes to production, consumption, finance, and education are urgently needed. Churches in Europe – not unlike Dasgupta – also urged governments to develop a different form of national accounting than the GDP and use one that includes externalities such as the depletion of natural resources. An example in case is the CEC study *Beyond Prosperity* which underlined that:

“The current economic paradigm is not sustainable in the long run. If the vision of a sustainable economy replaces the reverence for quantitative economic growth, then the GDP will no longer be the main guide for organising and orienting economic governance.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ <https://www.oxfordclimatesociety.com/blog/ecological-debt-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter>.

⁴⁷ P. Dasgupta, *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review* (London: HM Treasury, 2021).

⁴⁸ Pavlovic, *Beyond Prosperity*, 60.

Economic targets aiming at GDP growth, together with efforts to increase competition and enlarge market areas often come at the expense of human, social, and natural capital, and lead to the breakdown of social cohesion – as currently witnessed across Europe and beyond. An idealised model of the economy, which treats social and ecological costs as externalities, is neither credible nor viable. Can we rethink our policies and make them more humane, compassionate and sustainable? And should we not start with the simple truth that our economies are embedded within and dependent upon nature?

Questions:

- “We live in debt to nature, which coming generations may have to repay”. How do you respond to this thought?
- Are we aware of our excessive ecological footprint? What can we do about it?
- Is there a role for churches to play in this regard? What can/should the Church do in addressing these concerns?
- Are we ready to give up of some of our prosperity benefits?
- What does a circular economy mean to you, and does it make sense in your community or country?

A sustainable, fair, and green economy. Is a green and circular economy possible?

What would a sustainable, fair, and green economy look like? The EGD sets out a vision for such an economy across Europe. The key term it suggests is the “circular economy”. How does the circular economy differ fundamentally from the dominant “linear economy”?⁴⁹ It seeks to

⁴⁹ Walter R. Stahel, *The Circular Economy: A User's Guide* (London: Routledge, 2019).

rebuild capital, whether natural, manufactured, human or social. It is a strategy to address resource scarcity and in which everything is recycled. It is a truly circular system.⁵⁰ In a circular economy some fundamental principles would apply, such as extended producer liability, the highest value given to the preservation principle, taking care of Europe's waste responsibly, proper stock management and, in relation to this, the potential of urban mining aimed at recovering valuable resources from waste on an industrial scale.

A circular economy aims to maintain a system that balances economic, ecological, and social needs while based on a caring for each other and caring for the environment. In other words: Do not repair what is not broken. Do not remanufacture something that can be repaired. Do not recycle what can be remanufactured. Although suggested by the Green Deal as a key component of a sustainable future, the circular economy is underpinned in the Green Deal by the vision of economy still based on permanent growth. But if the economy is indeed supported by circulated, renewable, and not-extracted natural resources, what will be the sources of its growth? How will it be "fuelled" for ever-growing production and consumption?

Here are some challenging ideas for discussion. For example, in a green and fair economy the continuous pursuit of economic growth and the pursuit to increase efficiency might be replaced by the pursuit of *sufficiency*. This would mean that a considerable downscaling of production and consumption is needed. Or perhaps a green and fair economy would be a circular economy which values stewardship over ownership and puts all stakeholders, rather than only the shareholders, at the centre of its policies, one that would stimulate caring and sharing. It would preferably tax the use of energy and raw materials/resources

⁵⁰ K. Nieuwerth, "Ecojustice is Part of Just Peace: A Peace Church Perspective on the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda" (lecture, Global Mennonite Peace Conference, Elspeet, Netherlands, 2019, to be published).

rather than labour. Is such an economy possible or is it just a Utopian dream?

There are practical steps that can help. For instance, in Sweden VAT taxes on repair were halved in 2016. However, since taxation policies are the competence of the member states, the EU could only advise other member states to follow the Swedish example. Presently fiscal policies tax labour heavily and subsidise the production and consumption of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels. An alternative would be to tax virgin non-renewables instead and not charge VAT on value-preserving activities such as reuse, repair, and remanufacture. Instead, we could give them “carbon credits” for the prevention of greenhouse gas emissions in relation to the significant reduction involved.

Questions:

- Can economic growth be reconciled with sufficiency?
- Do we need to consume more and more?
- Is there a way how to define what is enough in our consumption?
- In what way is the vision of circular economy compatible with the idea of economic growth based on ever-growing production and consumption?

European Green Deal, green economy, and agriculture

Last but not least, a vision of a sustainable economy needs to take into consideration the green dimension of agricultural policy. Agriculture, its relation to the EGD, and a vision of a sustainable future constitute a serious concern. The EGD states explicitly that agricultural policies need to be transformed also. It aims to make agricultural subsidies conditional upon sustainable practices, to eliminate the use of pesticides, to reduce emissions of carbon, methane and nitrogen, and to stimulate

organic farming. Admittedly, agriculture is particularly complex for a number of reasons. The greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture include nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and methane (CH₄), as well as carbon dioxide making mitigation more challenging. Under particular circumstances agriculture (particularly grazing), forestry, and other land uses can act as carbon sinks, rather than sources of carbon emissions.

The range of types of agriculture across Europe is wide and reflects different habitats and different traditions, making it difficult to generalise. Nevertheless, if there is one sector of the economy that requires restructuring in the direction of a green economy, that certainly is agriculture. In many Western European member states agriculture has become an intensive industrial activity. Particularly animal husbandry in some parts of Europe is a long way from “stewardship and care for creation”.⁵¹ Arable agriculture in many other parts of Europe has also intensified and is accompanied by the use of many pesticides that are harmful to water quality, wild animals, and human beings alike. Pollution levels (nitrogen, phosphate, pesticides) in agriculture are actually contributing to the deterioration of the natural habitats of wild plant and animal species as mentioned earlier. Finally, the EGD – as far as this topic is concerned – combines agriculture and forestry into one category, which means (since forests are carbon sinks) that the CO₂ emissions of agricul-

⁵¹ Take for example the Netherlands: of a population of 17 million humans there are some half million goats, 5 million milking cows, 12 million pigs and 100 million chickens bred on farms! The Dutch government has adopted policies to move towards what it calls “circular agriculture”. However, with its enormous animal husbandry industry, exporting many animals annually and importing lots of feed/fodder, mainly soy from Latin America, how could it ever become circular? The number of animals kept would have to be reduced drastically and feed/fodder would have to be supplied by arable farmers to close the loop, instead of importing it. For example, the currently “wasted” leaves of sugar beet and other root crops could possibly replace the import of soy.

ture – not to mention methane – do not reflect properly the actual high emissions of the agricultural sector.

There are serious questions in terms of the interrelationships between Europe and other parts of the world. Does European agricultural export hinder the development of agriculture in Africa? In other words, a Green Deal or a Green Economy must involve a transformation of agricultural and food production policies, both at a European and a global level. However, a new agricultural policy package for the next seven years does not bode well for the intended mainstreaming of the EGD.

Large-scale intensive agriculture will still receive most of the financial support of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of 360 billion euros, constituting some 30 percent of the entire EU budget. It is true that some new ecologically based regulations and conditions have been integrated into the package, but these will only come into force in 2025, when half the plan period is already over. This is quite rightly being criticised by the EU Parliament. After all, the EGD included a target of achieving at least 25 percent of organic/ecological agriculture by 2030, which we will never be able to realise if this policy package remains unchanged.

In a previous publication, CEC argued that agriculture should only be subsidised for quality, rather than quantity. This would have to involve a marked shift from current intensive agricultural practices to farming practices that preserve nature, landscape, and water quality and to an agriculture that provides not just high-quality food, but also so-called “green and blue services” to society and which, therefore, should be rewarded for those services. In this context, farmers should refrain from using excessive amounts of (artificial) fertilizers, which destroy soil vitality, and pesticides, which harm biodiversity.

Basic instruments for such a transformation are already present in the CAP: the so-called “second pillar” (e.g., rural development policies) and the principle of cross-compliance in the first pillar. These should be

come the more dominant policies. In our view a “stewardship allowance” could replace many of the direct and indirect CAP production-related payments farmers receive. Farmers would receive such a stewardship allowance for every unit (hectare) of land and water managed in a sound ecological manner. This is in line with what in a circular economy would be known as proper stock management.

Questions:

- What types of farming and agriculture are the most dominant in your country or region?
- How should the farming and agriculture in your country or region change, if at all, in your opinion?

The EGD and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The UN Sustainable Development Goals were launched in 2015.⁵² SDGs are to stimulate “sustainable development” in both the southern and northern hemispheres. Seventeen major SDGs cover a broad agenda from “no poverty” through environmental goals to peace, justice and strong institutions. SDGs are the most important global effort to advance worldwide sustainable development. The EU considers the EGD as the implementation of the UN SDG Agenda. However, both the EGD and the SDGs are ambivalent concerning economic growth in developed countries.

Admittedly, the EGD has already come a long way in proposing progressive policies in areas such as the reduction of carbon emissions, the transition to renewable energy (SDG 13) and environmentally sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12). We welcome the great

⁵² *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

work that has already been done in this respect. The weight the SDG agenda gives to economic development in developing countries means it falls short of advancing development without further depleting the global natural resource base. The SDG agenda does not further a model of development that makes all of us share resources worldwide in a manner that makes us succeed to live within the planet's natural limits.

In drawing attention to poverty and economic injustice on a global scale, the SDGs raise issues of sufficiency, decency in prosperity, and of “what is enough” in economically developed parts of the world. SDGs suggest that we need a circular instead of a linear economy, one that is geared towards an “economy of enough” and is guided by ecological and ethical principles.⁵³ They help develop a vision of a sustainable future that incorporates both ecological and economic justice.⁵⁴

The EGD offers the EU an opportunity to pay increased attention also to all aspects of the sustainable development agenda, to the SDGs in their entirety, and to help implement them in a critical and constructive way, as some of the SDG goals have also been criticised for contributing to an increased ecological footprint rather than reducing it.⁵⁵ Fair partnership in particular, between the EU and African countries, including adequate financial support, is in this respect of key importance. The EGD emphasises measures to support a circular economy, sustainable production and consumption patterns. This is commendable, but seems to be limited to *environmental concerns*. We believe that this should include consideration of working conditions throughout the entire supply chain. Therefore, the lack of measures to address human rights viola-

⁵³ *The Dominant Economic Model and Sustainable Development; Are they Compatible?* (Conference of European Churches, Ecology and Economy Working Group, Brussels, 1995).

⁵⁴ *Sharing God's Earth and its Riches Justly* (Conference of European Churches, Thematic Reference Group on Economic and Ecological Justice, Brussels, 2018).

⁵⁵ Nieuwerth, “Ecojustice is Part of Just Peace”.

tions in supply chains (SDG 8) is a weakness of EGD that deserves attention. Here we also see demonstrated that there is a fundamental tension between the proponents of an “open economy” and the advocates of a “circular economy” that would “close the circles” as much as possible at national (member states) and international levels (EU).

Last but not least, when addressing justice, we need to be aware that the wealth of the (few) wealthiest people on the planet has increased during the pandemic, while their ecological footprint is enormous. There is good data available from Bloomberg and Oxfam on the growth of wealth among the world’s richest people during the pandemic. The figures are really shocking. It is an example of the fact that the poor are in reality already left behind, contrary to the ambitions set out in the EGD. In this respect we miss a reflection in the document on solidarity beyond the EU, which should not only consider the ecological footprint, but also the social footprint of the EU economy on other parts of our one world. Implicitly, the EGD suggests that Western countries are leading the struggle against climate change, but sadly this is based on a neo-colonial attitude of European superiority. Similarly, the EGD does not problematise current practices of European companies/multinationals resulting in environmental degradation in the Global South (e.g., land grabbing, mining, export of waste).

Questions:

- Has your church, community or country discussed the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- How do the SDGs help you think about global developments and the link between Europe and other countries in the world?

CONCLUSIONS

How do we respond to these complex challenges and how do churches across Europe strive for a more just and sustainable future? The need for transformation has been demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown how vulnerable our worldwide human networks are. It has also pointed to quick changes that can be made to reduce carbon footprints: for example, the reduction in commuting to work, business travel, and the growth in new communications technologies such as online videoconferencing tools. We need a comprehensive anti-crisis strategy that focuses on adapting the current system and transforming it into a less vulnerable, more stable, inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economy. Can we build a sustainable development strategy that is ecologically bounded, ethically grounded, and inclusive in terms of distribution of and access to resources?

The challenge we face is to convert unparalleled crises into opportunities. The situation calls for more dynamic, creative, diverse, and distributed forms of leadership that are more inclusive, effective, and based on networked forms of multilateral coordination. The EGD is a step in the right direction. To live within the planet's natural limits is, however, the task which forces us to see it from a more comprehensive perspective. In this document we have drawn attention to a number of good ideas for the development of such a perspective. We would welcome the input of churches and others in this exercise.

Churches have an important role to play. With a long tradition of caring for others, helping those in greatest need, and with our new awareness of the importance of caring for nature, we are in a strong position to urge governments, local, national, or European to think differently and take action. With this document, we invite churches in Europe and others interested in addressing these concerns to build a dialogue around ideas discerning a possible way forward to a more sustainable future.

Questions:

- Arguing for a greater equality of wealth and proper respect for creation, how can we think about a better way forward?
- The European Green Deal offers opportunities to help bring about the objectives. Is the EGD sufficient? If not, how can it be strengthened?

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Every Part of Creation Matters

A discussion paper



The text summarises work of the thematic group on Economic and Ecological Justice and Sustainable Future of the Conference of European Churches. The group consists of theologians, experts in ecological and political science, as well as activists from churches across the continent.

Caring for God's creation is an integral part of the calling of the churches. In this publication the Conference of European Churches is asking how this can be done?

The book offers a summary of studies and discussions among theologians from churches of different confessional families. A first theological section underlies key aspects of several theological traditions. In a second section, we learn about the European Green Deal aiming to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy with no net greenhouse gases emissions by 2050. The text supports the main aim of the Green Deal, however, raises concerns related to some of its principal parts.

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