

Ecological mutation and Christian cosmology*

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International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology,
Osnabrück, August 2021

(translated by Sam Ferguson)

Since I am unable to speak as a theologian at this conference, I am addressing you as someone who has tried to grasp what the ecological mutation is doing to philosophy; and also as someone who has always been inspired by Catholicism, and has been frustrated at being unable to transmit its message to my loved ones. So in this lecture I shall try to link these two crises: that of ecology and that of transmission. I want to see if a different understanding of the mutation currently under way would make it possible to revisit the message in a different way. I will proceed in three stages: in the first part I will define the contrast between cosmological projection and preaching; in the second part I will list some points where, in my view, the change of cosmology provides a new opening for certain traditional questions of transmission and preaching; finally, I would like to summarise the present situation, as I see it, by presenting a riddle that will, I hope, open up the discussion.

I:

Any change in cosmology presents an opportunity for Christian preaching to renew both the form and the content of its message. We are now living through a rather radical change of cosmology, of which the painful experience of Covid-19 is the most powerful expression.

At the risk of overdramatising, we could say that we have gone from a cosmology whose canonical model is Galileo's experiment calculating the fall of heavy objects on an inclined plane, to a cosmology whose canonical model is that of a virus that keeps passing from mouth to mouth, spreading from one person to another, forcing all societies to change their behaviour, and which is constantly mutating. The old mechanical models no longer occupy the centre of our interests, and it is now instead living things — and above all viruses and bacteria — which are capable of transforming their own conditions of existence to the point of bringing into being, over billions of years, an inhabitable terrestrial world, that are becoming the focus of all our

* This lecture builds on a number of conversations that I have had with Frédéric Louzeau, Anne Sophie Breitwiller, Emilie Hache, and Pierre Louis Choquet.

concerns, and all our knowledge. The Galilean tradition of an earth moving through infinite space is now replaced with an earth that ‘is moved’, in every sense of the word,¹ an earth that reacts to the actions of those particular living things called humans beings, and that raises the existential question of whether or not these humans will be able to maintain the conditions of its habitability. It seems to me that such a change in worldviews cannot fail to alter the framework, the direction, and expression of Christian preaching.

The first thing that is revealed by the ecological crisis, which I call the New Climatic Regime,² is that there is perhaps no necessary, definitive, indissoluble link between Christian preaching and the cosmological projections through which it was often expressed in the past. By ‘cosmological projection’ I mean the Grand Narrative of what the catechism called the ‘Holy History’, which elaborated a magnificent account of the world leading from Creation to the Endtimes. This account, which is depicted in paintings in countless churches, still has the power to overwhelm both art lovers and believers through its magnitude and fullness. However, it is precisely this fullness, this completeness, this magnitude that prevents us from grasping the substantial rupture that has been introduced by the emergence of the new question of maintaining the world in a state that is habitable for humans and their fellow creatures. Cosmology (this time in the classical, theological sense) covers everything, but that is precisely the problem: it covers *too much*, and it too quickly covers over the key problem of the era we have collectively entered. The Holy History can no longer play out in the same way if there is no longer a terrestrial world where it can take place. This is why we must slow it down for a moment, and allow it to incorporate a new discontinuity into its Grand Narrative.

This discontinuity can be seen quite clearly when we realise that the Gospel message, by definition, is completely *indifferent* to any cosmology. This is why I use the term ‘projection’. The cosmological framework is an amplification, by means of a narrative or story, of a message whose radicality obeys completely different *rules of verification*. Indeed, it is the particular feature of the beings who convey this message in their preaching that they are *sensitive to the word*, and that they therefore found their truth in their

¹ This expression is taken from Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

² *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

ability to convert those whom they address.³ Where there is no conversion, there is no truth.

To use the central example so much liked by Ivan Illich, the Good Samaritan becomes the neighbour of the wounded man who has been left behind by the priests, and it is in this very act that lies the truth of the interaction; not in the matter of ethnicity or adherence to any worldview.⁴ Becoming the neighbour of the wounded man, without hesitation and without worrying about his own urgent affairs, defines the situation and consequently breaks the spatio-temporal framework in which the other three protagonists, as well as the Samaritan, are situated. The question of final ends is played out here and now, and therefore also the question of salvation. In such a situation, the cosmological framework is not only irrelevant, but it is rather the very obstacle that the act of charity breaks. The continuity of preaching rests on just such acts of charity that, through transmission from one person to another, are capable of establishing — to summarise all too briefly — a whole *people of saved neighbours*.

In relation to this continuity, cosmological projections serve as *altar of repose*, a kind of place holder, to summarise the situation *while awaiting* the resumption of acts of charity. It is such acts of charity that *verify* the quality of the act of faith, rather than the spatio-temporal framework by which it was summarised for a time. By definition, this framework belongs to the domain of common sense, whereas, also by definition, the act of faith breaks with this same common sense. This is precisely where the distinction between the two movements can be detected: whereas we adhere to the spatio-temporal framework, as an object of belief, the act of faith demands that we convert those we are addressing, that we become their neighbour. The two elements are not in continuity with each other. And above all, they do not age in the same way. Cosmological projection varies in space and time, whereas, by definition, the act of preaching modifies space and time since it founds the moment of salvation, the attainment of final ends. It is in this sense *universal* (or at least *universalisable*), but only if it succeeds in converting those to whom it is addressed, whereas cosmological projections are, by definition, *relative* to a time and a people.

³ On this very specific mode of existence, and its own mode of truthfulness, see *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴ Ivan Illich, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1992).

It is clearly this radical discontinuity between the act of faith and belief in a spatio-temporal framework that explains why each change of cosmology forces both preaching and theology to start over again. When the two are in phase, the problem does not arise: if the rich young man in the Gospel gave up following Jesus's call, it was not because of any problem in understanding the framework in which the Master was expressing himself — they shared the same framework — but rather because the imperative demand of the preaching asked of him something that he refused to follow, 'for he had great possessions'.

The situation is obviously very different when the two are no longer in phase. Each receiver of the preaching will then have to decide whether to adhere to a framework that is alien to them, or whether to allow themselves to be transformed by an injunction that transforms them into a neighbour, an injunction that breaks with the frameworks of the two protagonists. The Samaritan and the wounded man have nothing in common, except precisely that which makes them neighbours of each other in spite of the frameworks associated with their respective identities. When the distance between cosmological projections and the act of faith becomes infinite, preaching becomes impossible, time is wasted in unravelling what depends on one and what depends on the other, and the interlocutors find themselves separated indefinitely. They have then missed the opportunity to encounter the Gospel message because they have been asked to believe first in the framework in which it is currently collected and simplified — even though the message itself breaks with this framework! It is as if the Good Samaritan had first asked the wounded man to convert to his sect before binding up his wounds... In times of cosmological crisis, the situation becomes more and more tragic, the Gospel message literally becomes *inaudible* — at least when it is directed *ad extra*, towards those on the outside, the very people to whom the message is addressed.

I will take this gap as the starting point for the second part of this lecture, by asking whether the current crisis might offer an opportunity to reduce the gulf that separates the message from its current expression.

II:

The most common cosmological projection today, or at least up until the prophetic rupture introduced by Pope Francis's *Laudato si'*, is based on the rearrangements made during the modern period to accommodate the

concept of Nature as being subject to laws. Indeed, it was largely a reaction to the influence of modern science that gave rise to: the opposition between transcendence and immanence; the emphasis on the destiny of souls rather than that of the world; the obsession with questions of morality in parallel with a growing lack of interest in the fate of the cosmos; the fear of ecology; the dread of paganism; the Church's retreat into a search for identity; and, above all, this strange idea that, faced with the Grand Narrative of Nature proposed by Science, it was necessary to promote an alternative Grand Narrative that presented a different, more 'spiritual' and less 'material' version of world history.

Although these rearrangements may have seemed necessary from the seventeenth to the twentieth century to resist the deanimation of the world imposed by scientism, they may no longer be necessary today, now that the very concepts of 'matter' and 'materialism' have been thrown into crisis by this new cosmological transformation. From the moment when the key question becomes that of the earth's habitability, we realise that the materialism of the previous period was hardly 'materialist' at all, since it had forgotten, obliterated, denied the role, the scope, the importance, the fragility, the intermingling of living things, which are alone capable of constituting, over the course of millennia, the envelope necessary for prolonging the terrestrial story. The earth sciences no longer have much to do with 'Science' (with a capital 'S') as it was still imagined in the twentieth century, and against which theology had tried to draw up an alternative Grand Narrative.⁵ Fighting against 'materialism' seems a very outdated task when, on the contrary, we must learn to rematerialise, in a thousand different ways, our belonging to the Earth. This immense rupture in conceptions of the world offers theology the opportunity to rethink, once again, as it has always managed to do in times of crisis, how to accompany the renewal of preaching, now that this preaching is liberated from cosmological projections that no longer correspond to the demands of the time.

And it is perhaps with time that we can begin a first inventory of these transformations. In an important but little-known book, Vitor Westhelle underlines the astonishing tropism of modern theology for the *temporal* dimension, which has made eschatology into a theme that is almost

⁵ A summary of this transformation can be found in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Critical Zones — The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), and in the exhibition bearing the same title at the ZKM Karlsruhe until January 2022.

exclusively linked to the Grand Narrative of the Holy History.⁶ As if eschatology were not a *spatial* as well as a temporal theme.

For the Good Samaritan, the wounded Jew is just as eschatological, is just as much a mark of final ends, limits, boundaries (this is the meaning of the word *eschaton*) as the Grand Narratives of the End of the World, with their special effects, angels, trumpets, and resurrections, which perhaps preoccupied the priests who passed by the wounded man in their hurry to go and fulfil their obligations in the Temple. But what the New Climatic Regime decisively brings to the fore is precisely the question of *limits*, and the terrible demand that these limits should define the *final ends*. This era is coming to the realisation that it has no time to wait. And, consequently, that any narrative that minimises the spatial demand of eschatology in favour of a projection in time betrays, in fact, the very demand of salvation. What is the use of saving your soul if you end up losing the terrestrial world? The cry repeated every day by earth scientists in an increasingly strident manner, ‘it’s now or never’ (and repeated once again this month in the latest IPCC report), cannot fail to resonate in an infinitely tragic way for every Christian soul. And especially in light of the indifference of so many Catholics who are convinced that the disappearance of the terrestrial world is essentially ‘irrelevant’ to the question of Salvation, since they are convinced, in any case, that they will always be able to turn ‘to Heaven’.

Nothing shows more starkly the absolute disconnect between the cosmological projection of the Holy History and the demands of the act of faith than this inversion of the very *direction* of the relationship between Earth and Heaven. In the old tradition, Heaven obviously did not mean only an ascent on High, but, above all, a break with all kinds of belonging, all cosmological projections. *Caelum* in the sense of Heaven was not to be confused with *caelum* in the sense of sky. The fact remains that, from the time of the modern compromise, in order to resist the so-called ‘materialism’, Heaven came to designate an escape from the world. It seemed that we would turn our attention on High once and for all. A whole imaginary, a whole art, tens of thousands of sermons, hymns, and prayers, a huge apparatus of metaphors, conditioned reflexes, mental images, a whole ‘ascensionism’ towards the High, whereas a concern for the Earth — the real

⁶ Vitor Westhelle. *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present* (London: Palgrave, 2012). One quotation among others: ‘Paul Tillich, certainly one of the great theologians of the past century and highly sensitive to cultural issues and values, went so far as to claim that Christianity brought about the triumph of time over space. He identified paganism with the “elevation of a special space to ultimate value and dignity.”’ (p.10).

‘Holy Land’ — supposedly led souls down below: now or never, there or nowhere.

This astonishing inversion in the model of the Endtimes goes against the grain of ordinary forms of faith and ritual, and cannot fail to have consequences for theology and even dogmatics. This ‘new’ earth, which was the object of such great hope, appears today in all its *newness*, but in a totally unforeseen form, that of a tiny envelope, infinitely old and fragile, woven by the intermingling of living things, and which we must learn to care for so that it does not disappear altogether. It is no longer the object of a distant eschatological expectation, but that of a present action that judges each of us just as sharply as the rich young man in the Gospel story, asking: ‘What have you done with the world?’

What paralyses this redirection down below is obviously the strange theme of the supposedly ‘stifling’ nature of immanence⁷ in relation to the necessary ‘elevation’ towards transcendence. Yet the opposition immanence / transcendence is itself also an artefact of the cosmological projection invented in reaction to the concept of Nature. At the time, it was necessary to insist on a ‘supplement of soul’, as a correction to the so-called ‘materialist’ version of modern scientism, a conception that limited life to the narrow confines of biology.

Yet the living beings that we must learn to take care of today bear no resemblance to the living beings of the Darwinism of the past. Those beings belonged to Nature, they were supposed to adapt to an external environment, they obeyed laws that were superior to them, and, in particular, the supreme law of natural selection, which was a barely secularised form of Providence. The whole challenge for Christians therefore consisted in ‘escaping’ the grip of these living beings in order to really exist *as humans*. But today’s living beings have a completely different pedigree: they made themselves by gradually constituting, through their own intermingling, the conditions of habitability that are favourable to them. It is these living things that have produced the environment, including the soil and atmosphere. To ‘escape’ from their grip is therefore meaningless; you might as well not want to exist at all. They do not belong to Nature (a half-concept, the other half of which is, of course, Culture). They are the world they have given themselves and in which we humans are well and truly enveloped. As a result, ‘immanence’ is no longer a direction whose opposite would be ‘transcendence’. This world of living things is as ‘transcendent’ as it could possibly be, in the very real sense that their

⁷ The expression is even found in *Laudato Si’*.

interactions constantly 'transcend' themselves. Every day we discover the power and fragility of their 'transcendences', including in the tragic experience summarised by the now well-known term 'the Anthropocene'.

It is this very special transcendence that was so aptly described in Saint Francis of Assisi's famous *Laudes Creaturarum*, in which he celebrated not only 'Sister Moon' and 'Brother Wind', but also 'our Mother Earth', and finally 'our sister bodily Death'. There is a strange familiarity between the New Climatic Regime and the incarnation. The ecological crisis is a *prolongation* in the very direction that the incarnation already pointed to. Salvation is movement towards abasement, kenosis. What is at issue are the limits of anthropocentrism, limits that are found both in the classical theme of man's dependence on his creator and in the current theme of man's dependence on the living beings that have gradually, over billions of years, constituted the provisionally habitable world into which man has inserted himself. Obviously, this overcoming of anthropocentrism was impossible as long as the ecological turn was associated with a 'cult of nature'. The contradiction with the Gospel message, as well as with the ordinary cosmological projection, was too manifest. But, in the end, ecology has little to do with Nature, that seventeenth-century invention produced in order to provide a framework for the cosmological transformation of the time. Today, ecology is no longer a matter of Nature at all, but of caring for the beings on which we depend and which depend on us, and whose destiny is not regulated in advance by any higher Law. The incarnation immerses us in a story of intermingling with the living beings whose salvation now depends in part on the acts of charity that we can perform without postponing them on the pretext of 'another world': now or never, here or nowhere. If Christians fail to respond to this bifurcation, it means that they prefer to cling to the cosmological projection to which they are accustomed, and so to sacrifice the Gospel message which they have been called upon to take up.

It is not only the concept of Nature from the last three centuries that paralyzes this descent, this abasement, this kenosis, but also the unhealthy fear of 'paganism', as if by embracing a care for the Earth we would 'fall back' to the level of idolaters. And yet, the concept of paganism is like that of Heaven: what had been a necessary contrast at the time when this new form of truthfulness was emerging (which therefore leads Jan Assmann to refer to Christianity as a 'counterreligion')⁸ has become in the modern era a kind of colonial fantasy, like the 'barbarian' of ancient times. Paganism exists only in the eyes of the civilisers and modernisers. But those who are disparagingly

⁸ Jan Assmann, *Le monothéisme et le langage de la violence* (Paris: Bayard, 2018).

labelled with this term *preceded* the counterreligions by many years in their concern for the cosmos. Whereas, just a few decades ago, indigenous peoples were considered to belong to the past of peoples who were unanimously marching towards progress, now those same indigenous peoples are *ahead of us* in the search for a way of caring for the world that we now share with them. There is an *antecedence* of religious traditions here that should be the subject of just as much work as was done, from the very beginning of Christianity, on the antecedence of the Chosen People. (This also explains the significance of Pope Francis's prophetic gesture of asking members of Amazonian peoples to plant a tree in the Vatican garden in October 2019). Despite its long history of iconoclasm, the Christian counterreligion has no reason to quarrel with cosmological religions that depend on other models of truthfulness and aim at quite different goals. The desire for the world to continue can no longer be considered to be an error or a moral failing. The 'pagans' have therefore gone from being irreconcilable enemies to being our brothers in the shared task of maintaining the habitability of the terrestrial world.

These are the few points that I felt it was important to mention in order to point out the distance, which is now vast, between preaching and the cosmological projection that served as its provisional support. With regard to the eschatological dimension of time and space, the concept of Nature, the opposition between transcendence and immanence, the conception of living things, and the tense relationship between religions and counterreligions, we can measure the extent to which the New Climatic Regime is overturning the ordinary cosmological projection that remained roughly stable throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In many respects, the current mutation resembles, with respect to the dimensions that are affected, if not its actual content, the mutation that took place in the seventeenth century, when religious souls had to absorb the new cosmological conception linked to a certain Grand Narrative of Nature proposed by Science. This is not at all to say that the new earth system sciences finally offer the ideal framework for preaching to adopt, as if the message had to be adapted once again to scholarly truths, for the second time. It is simply that the shock that these earth sciences bring to our understanding of the world, and in particular to the concept of Nature, opens up an unexpected space where the classical questions of theology can breathe more easily, without being constantly forced to defend themselves against 'materialism'. The interest of the current Covid-19 pandemic lies in the possibility of playing the role of a troublesome gadfly, mosquito, or wasp

on all these issues, in order to remind ourselves constantly that we have, once again, changed the world and that it is high time that we took notice.

III :

I have often wondered, in pursuing the anthropology of the Moderns, why this form of preaching that is the soul and spirit of Christianity has never finally found an institution that is truly its own. It is true that the fragility of its movement, this highly demanding dependence on the capacity to convert those to whom it is addressed, which is the only means of ensuring the truth of what is said, may prevent it from stabilising itself in an institution tailored to it. Hence the temptation, always rejected and, at the same time, to which the Church has always had to give in, to rely on other, apparently more stable, forms of truth: political, moral, juridical, economic, artistic, mythical, scientific, each of which served as a placeholder, a relay, a storage place, before the resumption of preaching. This explains the importance taken on, over the years, by the various cosmological projections, accounts, and Grand Narratives that seemed to summarise the content of this paradoxical and radical message in a form that was more comprehensible and, above all, less demanding than preaching.

What is changing today is that we are coming out of the modern parenthesis. As we know, the clergy have long been concerned about whether or not Christianity should be ‘modernised’ to ‘adapt it to the times’. By an extraordinary stroke of luck, it is the whole of modernisation that is collapsing before our eyes today! We are therefore justified in asking whether the time has come, by taking advantage of the shock of this new cosmological mutation, to institute preaching — to use a trivial image — ‘within its own home’, and no longer surrounded by the trappings of the other modes of truthfulness. It would then no longer be a question of adaptation, compromise, or arrangement, but of inhabiting again.

As I am unable to draw theological lessons from these probably too disjointed remarks, I would like to offer you a riddle by reusing a well-known figure, that of the Garden of Eden. What would be changed in the Gospel message if we were to assume that the Christian God arrives in a Garden that has *already been there* for a long time, a luxuriant Garden that has developed, over billions of years, through the intermingling of living beings capable of providing one another, without having willed it or actively pursued it, with the conditions of habitability that ensure, year after year, the continuation of their adventure? This Garden symbolises the antecedence of living things and the key question of the conditions of habitability that they themselves have created. It is in this lush garden that a tree is planted, a tree *among others*,

known as the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil. This knowledge *adds* to the other forms of truthfulness a crucial novelty, that of final ends, of salvation, and of the relation to a neighbour that breaks with all belonging. The neighbours who are saved by this new form of discernment form a people, among other peoples, mixed among them. The history of this people neither summarises nor covers that of all the others. But it certainly *adds* to it. The question then becomes whether this people destroys the Garden from which it is excluded, like someone who saws off the branch on which they are sitting (we recognise here the old figure of the Fall and the Expulsion), or whether, on the contrary, this people is capable of engendering new variants, new species, new cultures, which enrich its diversity and ensure its continuity over time. A tree among many others, a variety of truth among others, certainly indispensable once it has been established, but without the privilege of definitively summarising all the others. This would be a major event, but one that could not harbour any hegemonic ambition. The question I would like to ask you is therefore very simple: would such an implantation make the message *audible* again to those who no longer have any key to decipher the cosmological projections that are used to explain it today?

There you have it, I have tried to link the two concerns I summarised at the beginning: a strong impression of the ecological mutation currently under way, and my fear that I am unable to share the message with my fellow human beings.