



# Lukas Vischer: Listening to Creation Groaning A Survey of Main Themes of Creation Theology

## 1. Place and Date of Publication

Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Listening to Creation Groaning: Report and Papers from a Consultation on Creation Theology organised by the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) at the John Knox International Reformed Center from March 28 to April 1<sup>st</sup> 2004*, Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 2004, Preface and Memorandum 7-31.

## 2. Historical Context

Founded in 1998 by Lukas Vischer and others, ECEN brings together persons holding responsibility for environmental efforts in the churches of Europe. Three areas received special attention at the consultation on Creation theology: Creation in the Old and New Testament, the contemporary understanding of Creation and new theological approaches in the three major confessional traditions in Europe, and a common response to the present ecological crisis.

## 3. Summary

In order to respond adequately to today's ecological crisis, it is essential for the churches to achieve clarity in their understanding of God's Creation and the destiny and vocation of human beings in it. The article refers to the following issues:

### 1. Creation in the Old and New Testament

creatio prima – creatio continua, the vocation of human beings in the community of creatures, "subdue the earth", the gift of the land, Sabbath, the bodily resurrection of Christ as salvation for soul and body, liberation of the groaning Creation, new Creation.

### 2. Issues and Perspectives in Systematics and Christian Ethics

Evolution and Creation, imago Dei, the place of human beings in the world of Creation, intrinsic value, environmental ethics, rights of future generations and rights of nature, Creation and worship, the destiny of Creation.

### 3. Witnessing in Today's Ecological Crisis

How assess the present situation, environmental justice, the economic system, ecological ethos and environmental principles, life styles, resistance and hope.

Western nations claiming the Christian heritage were not only the main actors in bringing about the environmental crisis, but they also continue to impose poverty and ecological destruction on the poorer countries of the globe. The ecological crisis demands a radical change in our life style as individuals and as Christian communities as well as a change of the economic system. The value of Christian resistance does not depend on future success. It brings fulfilment and joy because the actions required have the potential to make visible God's intentions with his Creation.

# Listening to Creation Groaning



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# Listening to Creation Groaning

Report and Papers  
from a Consultation on Creation Theology  
organised by the  
European Christian Environmental Network  
at the John Knox International Reformed Center  
from March 28 to April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004

Cover: Listening to Creation, painting by Nyoman Darsane, Bali, Indonesia,  
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## Preface

The present volume is the result of a study project of the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN). Founded in 1998, ECEN seeks to bring together persons holding responsibility for environmental efforts in the churches of Europe. Its primary aim is to foster exchange among them and to initiate common witness and action. But increasingly the need was felt to address the theological issues arising from the churches' commitment to the ecological cause. ECEN therefore issued an invitation to a number of theologians from all over Europe to meet and reflect together on the "present state of the theological debate". Where are the churches in their thinking on Creation? What place does environmental responsibility have in their teaching?

From March 28 to April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 a three-day consultation was convened at the John Knox International Reformed Centre in Geneva. The 25 theologians in attendance represented different disciplines, different confessional traditions and different parts of Europe (cf list on p. 32). Papers were circulated in advance and discussed at the consultation.

Three areas received special attention:

- a) *Creation in the Old and New Testament*. Much research has been carried out in recent years on the place of the theme of Creation in the Bible. There is a growing consensus on a number of new perceptions and perspectives.
- b) *The contemporary understanding of Creation in the three major confessional traditions in Europe – Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant – and new theological approaches to the theme, such as eco-feminism*. All confessional traditions in Europe have

developed new perspectives in their thinking about the Creation. Starting from different backgrounds they have come to similar conclusions in many fields. Though emphases may differ, the theme of Creation potentially provides much common ground for the ecumenical movement. The theological debate on Creation has been stimulated by new theological approaches. Reflecting the experience and sensitivity of women in their relation to God's Creation, eco-feminism has succeeded in pointing forcefully to the fundamental necessities for the sustaining of life.

- c) *How do we respond to the present ecological crisis?* The conditions of the periods in which the Biblical texts were written no longer prevail. Fundamental changes have occurred in our understanding of nature, including the nature of human beings. Much irreversible ecological destruction has already occurred. We cannot and must not simply reproduce the approaches of Biblical times. We are called to respond to *today's* challenges. How do we assess the present "state of the planet" and its future? What is our theological interpretation of the concepts of "sustainability" and "sufficiency"? How can Christian ethics take into account the "needs" of the whole of Creation? What are our expectations for the future?

The Consultation summarized the findings obtained in the exchange in a memorandum which is reproduced in the first part of the volume. The following sections contain the papers which were submitted on each of the three questions.

We are happy to share our findings now with the members of ECEN and all people interested and engaged in the ecological movement. The volume does, obviously, not claim to offer a complete "theology of Creation". It simply points to the theological issues which in our view call for new attention in the Christian community. It is an attempt to define the theological agenda with regard to the theme of Creation today. It is our hope that it will contribute to the further debate on the witness of the churches today.

Geneva, October 2004

Lukas Vischer

## Part I

### Listening to Creation Groaning

#### Main Issues in Creation Theology

#### A Memorandum addressed to the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN)

# Listening to Creation Groaning

## *Reflections and Notes on Creation Theology*

### **Introduction**

What do we understand by Creation? How do we see the role of human beings in the created world? What is our responsibility as Christians with regard to the Creation?

These questions have acquired renewed urgency. In order to respond adequately to today's ecological crisis, it is essential for the churches to achieve clarity in their understanding of God's Creation and the destiny and vocation of human beings in it.

It is widely held that the Judeo-Christian tradition bears to a certain degree responsibility for today's ecological destruction. Through the Biblical message, it is said, nature has lost its divine character; it has been turned into an object and human beings have received the mandate to "subdue the earth". Clearly, as we shall see, these allegations are due to a misreading of the Biblical texts. But there can be no doubt that Christians have for too long neglected the theme of Creation in their theological reflection and teaching and have accepted values and perspectives which are foreign to the Biblical tradition. They have uncritically supported modern domination of nature.

There have always been voices praising God's Creation but the ecological crisis has awakened the churches in particular ways. They have once more become aware of the relevance of the Biblical legacy which has again begun to speak in the churches. Since its early days, many Christians have been active in the ecological movement. Spontaneously they felt impelled to resist the suicidal course in which humanity is engaged. But it must also be said that the com-

mitment to the ecological cause is far from being unanimously accepted in the Christian churches. Many continue to suspect it to be an intrusion of “green politics” or “New Age” perspectives into their midst. They fail to see the fundamental connection between the Biblical message and ecological responsibility. The debate – sometimes even in the form of conflict – continues in the churches and it is essential that it be conducted with the utmost determination and commitment.

Since the Second World War, and more particularly since the 1970s, many attempts have been made by theologians and Christian thinkers to recover the Biblical teaching on Creation and to develop new approaches to the “rest” of Creation. There has been “a flourishing of eco-theologies”. A wealth of new insights has been gained in recent decades.

The following memorandum is the result of a three-day consultation which convened at the John Knox International Reformed Centre in Geneva (March 28 - April 1, 2004). The 25 theologians in attendance represented different disciplines, different confessional traditions and different parts of Europe. We were asked to respond to the following three questions:

- *Creation in the Old and New Testament*
- *The contemporary understanding of Creation in the three major confessional traditions in Europe – Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant – and new theological approaches to the theme, such as eco-feminism*
- *How do we respond to the present ecological crisis?*

The memorandum which we now share with the members of ECEN offers an account of our exchange. We hope that it will provide some help in future discussion both among members of ECEN and beyond.

## 1. Creation in the Old and New Testament

The theme of Creation is prominent in the Old Testament and also has much more importance in the New Testament than is generally assumed. In the past there has been a tendency to play down the significance of Old Testament texts referring to the created world. Especially in the German-speaking world the Bible was interpreted as the witness to God’s great deeds in history. God reveals himself in historical events, such as the Exodus, the conquest of the land, the exile and the return from the exile. The Old Testament, it was said, is to be read as the witness to these events. The faith in God the creator was regarded as secondary. The Creation story, a relatively late text, is to be understood as an extension of the faith in JHWH, the Lord of history.

But the witness to God the creator is, in fact, of primary importance in the Old Testament. God is the presupposition of all life and praise of the creator belongs to the core of the Old Testament witness. Over-emphasis on God’s action in history tends to eclipse the importance of this fundamental assumption of Old Testament faith.

### *1. Creatio prima – creatio continua.*

Attention is normally paid to the first chapter of the Bible – the story of God’s Creation in seven days. Other texts referring to God as creator were read in the light of this *creatio prima* even though many are older than the opening chapter of the Bible and describe God as continuously creating (*creatio continua*). God calls Creation into life and renews it day by day. He is the source of life and sustains and defends it against the attacks of chaotic powers. Without his fashioning power the created world could fall back into chaos. Creation is therefore an ongoing process. Many texts, especially the psalms, praise God’s presence and reliability. The wisdom literature sees Creation as a source of knowledge – providing guidance in daily life.

Several texts in the Old Testament deal with the origin of the world. The Creation story in Genesis 1 was written down in a later period



of Israel's history. It represents a theological reflection on God, the creator. It makes clear that the God of Israel is a universal God. The whole universe owes its existence to him and it is he who has established its coherence and order. The first chapter of Genesis must be seen as part of the chapters that follow (1-11) which also contain elements referring to Creation – the story of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, the Noah covenant introducing a revised order of Creation. The opening chapter is part of a sequence “Creation, destruction and new Creation”.

For a proper understanding of the Old Testament faith Creation it is essential to understand that God is continuously at work in his Creation. Exclusive attention on the *creatio prima* in Genesis 1 can easily prevent the adequate assessment of other texts referring to Creation. The Old Testament does not offer a theory on the origin of the world but invites Israel to respond in faith to the creating power of God. Creationist theories do not do justice to the Genesis 1 story and even less to the entire witness of the Old Testament on Creation.

## 2. *The Vocation of Human Beings in the Community of Creatures*

Human beings are, on the one hand, unique among God's creatures and have a special mandate to fulfil in Creation. On the other hand, they are also part of the whole of Creation.

The statement in Genesis 1 that human beings – male and female – were created in the image and likeness of God has at all times invited reflections on the nature and vocation of human beings. What is meant by “image”? The statement does not offer any additional explanations and is therefore open to many interpretations. Recent Old Testament research has placed particular emphasis on the fact that the term “image” was reserved to Oriental kings. Genesis 1 “democratizes” the notion by applying it to all human beings – male and female – without gender distinction. Just as Oriental kings were considered to be representatives of the divinity on earth, all people are created in the image of God and have the daunting task to be God's *vicarii* on earth. Kings exercise power – but they have to exercise it responsibly. The emphasis lies on the responsibility human beings are called to fulfil.

At the same time the Old Testament insists on the fact that human beings are part of the whole Creation. According to Genesis 1 God blesses the animals (22) and it is significant that animals and human beings were created on one and the same – the sixth – day. Both species share the same living space; they form a community. According to Genesis 9 God establishes a covenant with “all living beings which are with you”. In several psalms all creatures, animals, and even the sun and the moon, participate in the praise of God. The special ministry of human beings is exercised *within* the community of all creatures.

It is also significant that the Creation story recognizes the creating power of the earth. “Let the earth bring forth plants”. God acts through the soil; he gives to the earth the power of growth.

## 3. *Subdue the Earth*

The mandate given to human beings in Genesis 1, 28 has often been interpreted as an affirmation of human mastery over the created world – the earth and all living beings. According to the Bible, it is said, humans are called to dominate the world. In fact, the mandate actually bestows on human beings the vocation of being responsible stewards – *locum tenentes* of God on earth.

Two considerations are important in this respect. There is no doubt that the phrase uses strong terms to describe the role of humans in relation to the rest of Creation. Attempts to weaken the meaning of the verbs “subduing” and “subjecting” have been in vain. But it is important to interpret the meaning of the mandate in the context of the time when it was formulated. Israel experienced nature as hostile and Genesis 1, 28 gives humans the power to establish their “habitat” in this hostile nature. Today, roles are reversed; nature is at the mercy of human domination.

The text must not be read in isolation from the chapters in Genesis which follow. They describe human rebellion and degradation; the soil becomes intractable (Genesis 3, 18). The Cain story (especially Genesis 4, 17-26) emphasises the devastating impact of violence.

Genesis 1 offers an ideal picture – human beings are vegetarians (29), but after the flood a new order is established. Human beings are allowed to eat meat though God at the same time establishes a covenant with the whole earth. *The mandate given to human beings must be exercised under this covenant.*

#### **4. The Gift of the Land**

Eventually, God's covenant finds expression in the gift of the land. God's love and election are inseparable from the land which Israel has been given. The land is the place where the people are called to give praise to God and to obey God with an undivided heart. They have to be aware of the fact that the land is God's gift: through disobedience it can and will be lost. The commandment to "respect father and mother" is therefore accompanied by the phrase "that you may live a long time in the land that the Lord God has given you" (Exodus 20, 12). Exile – separation from the land – was experienced as separation from God (Psalm 137).

The close relationship of the people with the soil is reflected in many texts of the Old Testament. The land, only partially fertile and requiring much care to bring forth the harvest necessary for survival, was therefore a constant concern of daily life. This also finds expression in many Old Testament laws.

The presence of laws which benefit both the land and its non-human inhabitants, in addition to the Israelites themselves, indicates that the latter were meant to treat the land as part of the covenant community with God. This covenant was in effect a cosmic covenant. When the people of Israel pursued God's pattern for their society, the land would flourish. Correspondingly, when Israel spurned the worship of JHWE and neglected the demands of divine justice, the effects are not confined to human society but impact on the environment as well. The Isaiah narrative presents a direct causal relationship between human environmental exclusion and ecological degradation.

The earth is mourning, withering; the heavens are pining away with the earth. The earth is defiled under its inhabitants' feet, for they have transgressed the law, violated the precept, broken the everlasting covenant (Is. 24, 1-6; cf also 5, 8-10).

#### **5. Sabbath**

The institution and the laws connected with the Sabbath are of particular importance in this respect. Whatever the origin of the Sabbath, its celebration had implications for the relationship of human beings to the rest of Creation. On every seventh day rest is granted not only to people but also to animals and the soil. Human intervention with nature ceases: the celebration of the Sabbath is part of a cosmic order. As God rested on the seventh day, his people observe the seventh day as a day of rest. The observation of the Sabbath is fundamental for the integrity of the people of God. No other commandment occurs in so many passages of the Old Testament.

The Sabbath and the Jubilees express a deep concern both for the restoration of justice among the people and the maintenance of the fertility of the soil. Every seventh year the land must not be cultivated. After seven times seven years an additional jubilee is celebrated. There is no unanimity among scholars whether these commandments were actually observed. But even if they represent no more than an ideal, they show Israel's sense of responsibility with regard to the land.

#### **6. New Testament**

Faith in God the Creator is affirmed in the New Testament. For Jesus and his disciples confidence in the presence of God's creating power seems to be self-evident. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explicitly refers to God's care for all living beings as proof that the disciples do not need to worry about the next day. God the Father, the creator of all things, will care for them. He teaches the disciples to pray for their daily bread – confident that God will provide for their material needs. He warns against the accumulation of riches which misdirect heart and mind and bring no satisfaction.

The message of the Christian church emphasises the fact that the material world is God's Creation. In Jesus Christ God becomes a human being: the primary movement goes from God to the world. Liberation begins with God's identification with the world: the offer

of salvation is not exclusively addressed to the human soul but to the entire being – both soul *and* body. This is the deep significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and eventually of all people. Through Jesus' incarnation and resurrection God overcomes death and people are restored to the true image of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. With them, the whole of Creation will be liberated but now, it groans in travail – expecting eagerly God's ultimate intervention (Rom 8, 22).

The early Church consistently affirmed that God the Creator and the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ are one and the same, as expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity; Jesus introduces no new God. The early Church firmly rejected teachings like Marcion's which distinguished between a *demiourgos* and the true God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### 7. New Creation

History as we know it may end. The possibility of an end is present already in the Old Testament. Faced with the upheavals of his time, the so-called Isaiah Apocalypse (Is. 24-27) speaks of an imminent catastrophe which will undo God's Creation. In Isaiah 34 we read: "The skies shall roll up like a scroll and all their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree" (2-4). In the eyes of the author of these texts the covenant of Genesis 9 must not be understood as a guarantee that the world as we know it will never end. The author of Isaiah 65 goes even a step further and announces that JHWH will create a new earth and a new heaven (17). Possibly Genesis 1 depicts the vision of a future world – the world intended by God "in the beginning" and to be fulfilled in the end.

This expectation is present in the New Testament. There is no guarantee of any future of human history; the future entirely depends on God's love and decision. Through Christ we have been given the promise that there will be a new Creation, and in communion with Christ we anticipate this future – we *are* a new Creation. The old has passed, behold it has become new (II Cor 5); God's creating power goes beyond the present state of the world.

This understanding of a new Creation, however, is not limited to some imagined future time. Throughout their history many Christians have understood that the promise of a new Creation is a promise which is already being realised in the present through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And just as the Spirit is the agent of the redemptive healing of mind and body in the lives of the faithful, he is also the agent of renewal and restoration in Creation. It was this ecological spirit that inspired many saints to dwell with the wild beasts and St Francis to name the sun and moon as brother and sister and to preach to the birds. As Christians we live in the hope of the final new Creation of all things but this hope is also a spur to our own efforts in ecological restoration and in our struggle against injustice.

## 2. Issues and Perspectives in Systematics and Christian Ethics

Creation has always been an important theme of theological reflection. Wherever the Christian faith is presented in a coherent way, the theme of Creation is bound to be dealt with. But in recent times new issues and perspectives have emerged in theological debate. Partly, they have been raised by the challenges of natural science and partly by the experience of the ecological crisis.

The confessional traditions – Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant – have all faced the same challenges. In their dialogue with today's world they have come closer to one another. Even if their conclusions may differ according to the basic options they have inherited from the past, their responses tend to be similar.

At the same time, new approaches have developed in theological research and thought. Movements such as process theology and eco-feminism have had a strong impact on Christian thinking. Their merit

is that they introduced new issues into the debate and have become indispensable partners in the theological debate on Creation.

### ***1. Evolution and Creation***

For a long time, the notion of evolution was regarded by Christians as incompatible with belief in the Creator. For many, the idea continues to raise difficulties even today. In fact, the theory of evolution as the accepted way of describing the development of nature is entirely compatible with the Christian understanding of Creation. As we have seen above, Creation means a dynamic and steady process rather than a single act in the beginning.

There are two ways of looking at Creation. As Christians we believe in God's creating power; he has called the world into existence and we believe in the constant renewal of God's act of Creation. When we speak of nature, we mean the state the created world reaches in the course of its development. Nature is the Creation as it exists today. Christian hope is based on God's creating power.

On the basis of this fundamental conviction we believe that dialogue with the natural sciences can and must be sought. Science is capable of enlightening faith but it must also be recognised that there are limits to its competence to determine the course of its research. Any scientific initiative is subject to the precautionary principle or more broadly to the traditional principle not to do damage.

### ***2. Imago Dei***

The concept in Genesis 1, 28 continues to play an important role in today's theological debate. It is generally assumed that the notion does not primarily refer to a particular quality or condition of humanity but its destiny and mandate. The emphasis is on the vocation of human beings; they are called to make God visible in the world, to represent him – and this mandate indisputably includes power.

Human beings are given freedom to act; they are called to love God and to praise his name. But they can also use this freedom in their own name. Instead of remaining in communion with God, they can pursue their own ways. Human history is the history of human freedom for good and for ill.

Today we are faced with the results of this freedom. On the one hand, there are the achievements of the arts, culture, science and technology, on the other the disorder and destruction of the contemporary world. The realm of "freedom" has immensely increased; more and more areas of life are within human reach. The use and misuse of freedom leads progressively to incalculable consequences. Climatic conditions on the planet are changing due to human activity. Through the manipulation of the genetic code nature can be "changed". The central question of theological anthropology today is therefore the responsible use of human freedom. A new reflection is required on the use of human ability to "change" the world.

### ***3. The Place of Human Beings in the Whole of Creation***

What is the place of human beings in the Creation? Can they claim a central role? From many sides, Christianity is accused of exaggerated anthropocentrism. Two considerations must be taken into account.

There is no doubt that anthropocentrism in the sense of anthropomorphism must be rejected. The idea that human beings, as the crown of Creation, can dispose of all things – animals, plants, material resources – for their own purposes is foreign to the Biblical witness and cannot be defended. Anthropocentrism in this sense directly contradicts the respect due to God's Creation and is one of the important roots of today's ecological crisis. No doubt, according to the Biblical Creation story human beings came into existence last. But this does not necessarily imply pre-eminence over all other creatures. It also reminds us of the fact that the rest of Creation precedes human life, which emerges within the communion of creatures.

But if anthropocentrism refers to the fact that human beings are called to fulfil a special and specific role in world, it must be maintained. Human beings have, indeed, been given a central role which they are called to realize; and in today's ecological crisis humans have a special responsibility to contribute to the reconciliation of all things. The mere fact that humanity now wields sufficient power to destroy life on the planet imposes a responsibility on it which people cannot shun. In that sense already it carries a unique burden of responsibility. Many would refer to human beings as "priests of Creation". They are called to offer what is "good" to the creator.

In the Christian tradition the outstanding role of human beings has been confirmed by the fact that Christ, the second person of the Trinity, has become a human being and that the future of the whole Creation is dependent on the liberation of the "children of God" (Rom.8).

The debate on this issue is far from concluded. Many hold that traditional Christian teaching continues to give too much importance to human beings, and that it will, if not challenged, strengthen the case of the anthropomomist praxis prevailing today. In order to "listen to the groaning of Creation", the central role of human beings needs to be radically called into question. The relationship between human responsibility and respect for all living beings remains an issue for further debate.

#### 4. *Intrinsic Value*

Another question demanding further reflection is that of the intrinsic *value* of every creature. What do we mean by this term?

According to Christian teaching, the created world owes its existence to a cause outside itself, i.e. it does not contain in itself the reason of its existence. Being created is a gift. The fact that human beings are created at the end of the Creation process underlines the truth that they are part of Creation and depend on it. They do not exist outside the Creation and therefore do not have the capacity to

judge the worth or usefulness of other creatures. They are placed into the world created by God and have to recognise that every form of life is worthy to be lived.

But in what do the value and the specific dignity of Creation consist? Fundamentally, intrinsic value comes from the fact that each living creature is the subject of its own existence and that it has been willed into existence by God. We can therefore speak of an immanent quality given by God, which means that the intrinsic value of each creature has its foundation in the relationship that God the creator has established with it. Respecting the intrinsic value of all creatures is a pre-condition for living in communion with Creation.

#### 5. *Environmental Ethics – New Challenges*

Clearly, environmental ethics calls into question existing modern ethical frames such as utilitarianism or an ethic based on rights and duties. These need to be extended towards the non-human world so that the suffering of animals, for example, becomes morally worthy of consideration alongside human pain. The problem, however, is that these structures have been reduced to the human world. The term "common good" refers to human society and human interaction. The modern self as a moral agent increasingly understands the common good in a way that detaches it from both God and the cosmos.

Christian accounts of the common good emerge from an understanding of God as creator and originator of all things. God is the basis of the good order of Creation. Sin involves disconnection from God and therefore a rejection of God's ordering of Creation. The resurrection re-affirms God's commitment to the *whole* of Creation. Creation is not only a theme of the first article of the creed but is something that has been redeemed. Christian ethics therefore proceed from the divine intention to heal not only human life but the entire earth.

This point of departure has far-reaching implications for personal, economic and political ethics: it widens the frame of ethical consi-

derations. Christian ethics will always include advocacy for the suffering Creation

### 6. *Rights of Future Generations and Rights of Nature*

In particular, the ecological crisis directs our ethical consciousness to the needs of future generations. While in the past Christian ethics were primarily concerned with relations among human beings during their lifetime, today's threats to the future have compelled us to extend human responsibility to future generations. A behaviour is called for which ensures that future generations may enjoy the same conditions for constructing their life as the present one. The Creation is God's gift not only for our generation but is also offered to our children and our children's children.

It is not enough to insist that the claims of future generations be protected. Many hold that they need to be protected in a juridical form. Future generations have a *right* to live. They are *entitled* to a sufficient amount of natural renewable resources. Interference with the environment, in particular interference with eco-systems of animals and plants and genetic manipulation, requires *justification*. The cultural legacy and as well as other elements of human heritage must be protected by law.

Some go even further and speak of the necessity to recognize the *rights of nature*. Several attempts, made in this direction, are based on the conviction that the common origin of human beings and nature must be heeded. Nature also has a *right* to exist; living beings must be protected and their propagation assured.

Our juridical system is based on human subjects claiming their rights. People not capable of defending their interests by themselves, e.g. children or the handicapped, can be represented by persons acting on their behalf. This means in practice that future generations can only be protected by calling on the sense of responsibility of the present generation. But is this sufficient? Future generations will need to decide for themselves how to conduct their lives. The pre-

sent generation's responsibility to preserve a future for humanity is not an invitation to impose its own rule over future generations. Their own right needs to be respected. It will be important to engage in a dialogue with lawyers on this issue. How can future generations and nature enjoy rights of status and not only rights of recognition?

### 7. *Creation and Worship*

Creation is a gift received from God. A gift exists only in communion with its giver. Any gift that exists outside the relationship with the person who offers it loses its meaning as a gift; it may continue to exist as a thing but it is no longer a gift. It is essential to recognize God as the Giver of Creation. Worship is therefore fundamental for the Christian approach to Creation. Through the liturgy we praise God and in return receive his gift anew.

The inherited liturgies of the churches contain many elements that refer to Creation. Much has been lost in the course of history and needs to be recovered. On the basis of today's experience our ways of worship can be enriched.

The Eucharist is the privileged moment of Christian worship. It points powerfully to our dependence on the Creator. In the elements we receive the gifts of Creation, offer them again to the Giver and share them with one another. We regret that this relationship with the Creator and the whole is often obscured in today's eucharistic celebrations.

The common celebration of the Eucharist is essential for a credible witness in face of the ecological crisis. Though we are called to witness together to God's gift, Christians continue to be divided at the Lord's Table. Every possible effort must be undertaken to prepare the way toward the common celebration of the Eucharist by all Christians.

We support the idea of a special time in the church calendar to celebrate God's gift of Creation, in particular ECEN's proposal to

observe a “Time of Creation” from September 1<sup>st</sup> to the beginning of October. At present, the church calendar does not include any period explicitly referring to the first article of the Creed. A period concentrating on God the Creator and the Creation can serve as a reminder of the gift of Creation and provide the opportunity of a common liturgical renewal making fuller use of the rich Biblical heritage concerning Creation.

### **8. *The Destiny of Creation***

What can we say about the future of Creation? What hope can we have, given the threat of progressing ecological destruction? There is no unanimous answer to these questions.

On the one hand we face the possibility of extinction. Humans are in a position to destroy their habitat on the planet and it is therefore possible that humanity’s misuse of freedom results in death and nothingness. “Only in communion with the Creator can humanity avoid the return to nothingness.” How should God not pass judgment on human rebellion and bring human history to an end – or rather allow it to be brought to an end?

On the other hand, there is God’s promise to be faithful to his Creation. “The Lord will fulfil his purposes with me” (Ps.138, 8): God will not abandon his Creation but bring it to its fulfilment. The Bible speaks of a judgment (Matthew 25) but also contains the promise of God’s kingdom with its peace and harmony. It speaks of a new heaven and a new earth.

But what does this expectation imply? In what sense does the Bible speak of a “new” heaven? Do we expect a new world in continuity with the present world? Will it be “renewed” rather than “new”? Or will there be discontinuity between the present and the coming age?

The future can be seen in analogy to the events of the cross and the resurrection. Jesus, who came into this world, was executed and killed: humanity destroyed God’s gift to humankind. But God’s faithfulness became apparent in the resurrection. His gift is stronger

than human insensitivity and violence. The continuity between the present and the future lies entirely in his hands.

Whatever the nature of the new life, the Biblical expectation is that it will include the whole Creation.

How can we anticipate and prepare ourselves for the fulfilment of God’s kingdom? We are called to bear a witness of love in this world. In fulfilling this call we are nourished by the vision of God’s reign and new Creation. It provides a focus to our life style. We live in the assurance that every act of love is taken up into God and that nothing is ultimately lost.

## **3. Witnessing in Today’s Ecological Crisis**

We no longer live in the same world as the authors of the Biblical texts. Human dominion over the world has progressed. Nature has already been deeply affected by human intervention and all signals indicate that the process of destruction will continue in the future. How do we respond to today’s situation and prospects?

### ***1. How do we Assess the Present Situation?***

The present situation is characterised by deep contradiction. Information about the threats of the future is available. Scientists issue warnings about the deadly consequences of the present course and numerous attempts have been made to develop alternative scenarios. But the response to this information remains inadequate. There is a kind of silent agreement to reduce the magnitude of the crisis. Despite all warnings, “business as usual” scenarios tend to continue.

Through the Brundtland Report and the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) the notion of *sustainable development* has been widely publicized; principles to guide political decisions have been

proposed and areas of action have been suggested (Agenda 21). Ten years later the Summit of Johannesburg (2002) demonstrated that little progress has been made. The debates on the UN convention on climate change are in an impasse. Even some of the principles agreed upon in Rio de Janeiro are once again being called into question.

The first contribution of the churches must therefore consist in pointing to the true magnitude of the crisis. Christians must have the courage openly to face the threats and invite society to adopt realistic measures.

## 2. *Environmental Justice*

The causes of the environmental crisis do not simply lie with humanity at large. The development which has led to the present situation originated in the West – mostly in countries claiming the Christian heritage. It is essential for Christians in Europe to remind themselves of their role. Not only were Western nations the main actors in bringing about the environmental crisis, but they also continue today to impose poverty and ecological destruction on the poorer countries of the globe.

The “ecological footprint” of Europe is out of proportion. The life style of the industrialised nations is the source of much suffering in the world; it amounts, in fact, to a new form of exploitation. Climate change provides a good illustration. The excessive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of the industrialised nations contribute to the greenhouse effect. The effects of climate change primarily affect countries of the South.

The negative role of the industrialised countries is often belittled in debates on environmental measures. Churches have the responsibility constantly to remind the world of the demands of justice and solidarity.

## 3. *The Economic System*

The demands of the ecological crisis raise fundamental questions about the validity of the present economic system. The commitment

to constant economic growth tends to exploit resources without realistic consideration of the ecological consequences. Environmental measures have little impact, as long as the overall course of production and consumption continues to be pursued at the present rate. The notion of *sustainable development* must not be used (or rather misused) to make the present system more acceptable by slight “ecological corrections”. The ecological crisis demands a radical change of orientation. Economic activities must be guided by the recognition of “scales” of exploitation. Notions of sustainability must be supplemented by notions of sufficiency.

Christians therefore have the responsibility of engaging in a critical analysis of the present system. This also involves a critique of the utilitarian considerations governing environmental debates – as if the crisis could eventually be overcome on the basis of cost-benefit decisions.

## 4. *Ecological Ethos and Environmental Principles.*

The essential presupposition for effective environmental action is what we could call an ecological ethos. The primary concern is not a set of moral rules and environmental guidelines but an attitude of respect for God’s gift of Creation. The churches’ main task is therefore to promote and keep alive the faith in the Creator as the source of a resistance movement on behalf of the planet. Numerous statements of churches and ecumenical bodies have expressed the need for this fundamental commitment. For Europe, the most representative among these statements is the Charta Oecumenica (2000):

Believing in the love of the Creator God, we give thanks for the gift of Creation and the great value and beauty of nature. However, we are appalled to see natural resources being exploited without regard for their intrinsic value or consideration of their limits, and without regard for the well-being of future generations. Together we want to help create sustainable living conditions for the whole of Creation.

However, on the basis of such an attitude we can affirm the value of certain guiding principles for action. Fundamentally, we are called out to act in priority to liberate and strengthen the weakest, the most



defenceless, the poorest, the bruised (Luke 4, 18; Isaiah 58, 6-7) – a form of conduct summed up in the formula of “the preferential option for the poor”. This option has been developed in the principle of solidarity and in several other principles which have been expressed in international instruments, in particular:

- *Subsidiarity* - stipulating that decisions should be taken at the closest level possible to citizens or to the problem. Since this in turn requires that citizens have access to the information they need, the flow of information must be guaranteed. For Europe, the Aarhus Convention (UNECE Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters, Aarhus 25 June 1998) marks an important step forward in this respect.

- *Precautionary principle* - which can be defined in the following way: where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation (Bergen Ministerial Declaration, Follow-up to the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, May 1990)

### 5. *Life styles*

We are called to bear a *personal* witness. What we are saying about the creator and the Creation must find expression in the way we seek to shape our personal life. Equally essential is the life style of Christian *communities*.

The ecological crisis has made us aware of the fact that natural resources are not unlimited. We have to respect scales and limits of exploitation. Clearly, the claims of the industrialised nations of Europe exceed these limits. The call of Charles Birch at the Fifth WCC Assembly is still valid, namely, that “the rich must live more simply that the poor may simply live”. For industrialised nations it is inevitable to recognise a level of sufficiency. Through a life style of simplicity, Christian communities can offer models which anticipate the society of the future.

Christian spirituality provides inspiration in this respect. Jesus teaches his disciples simplicity: he does not demand rigorous asceticism. He enjoys and gives thanks for God’s gift of Creation. But prayer and fasting are also features of his life: Jesus vigorously rejects the accumulation of goods. The meaning of life does not lie in material goods; he warns against the idol Mammon. Christian spirituality emphasises the value of communion; Jesus shares meals with people. Though Jesus calls into question a legalist approach to life, the celebration of the seventh day remains an important element of Christian spirituality. The day of rest and praise counteracts the power of the idol “time” and restores the true meaning of time as God’s gift.

### 6. *Resistance and Hope*

Will resistance against the course of destruction succeed? Will the present direction of history change? We do not know. At first sight, the struggle of individual persons and communities has little chance of changing the course of events. But we must not be guided by the “realistic” assessment of our chances. The future is in God’s hands and our confidence rests in God’s creating power.

The value of resistance does not depend on future success. It brings fulfilment and joy because the life styles and actions which are required have the potential to make visible God’s true intentions with his Creation.

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**Part II****Reflections on the Biblical Evidence**