

# Imago Dei as Kenosis: Re-imagining Humanity in an Ecological Era

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Boston College  
School of Theology and Ministry

*Imago Dei as Kenosis:  
Re-imagining Humanity in an Ecological Era*

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Sacred Theology

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*Imago Dei as Kenosis*: Re-imagining Humanity in an Ecological Era  
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## Abstract

This thesis is concerned with ecotheology and theological anthropology, in general, and in particular, with the interpretation of the *imago Dei* motif as a source of ecological commitment. More specifically, it is an exploration of the theological idea of *kenosis* as one meaningful, sound, and timely understanding of *imago Dei* within the context of the current ecological crisis. Although criticized for its alleged anthropocentric overtones, the notion of *imago Dei* should not be put aside or silenced, but rather reinterpreted. Understood as *kenosis*, it is a source and not a hindrance for ecological concern and ethical commitment inasmuch as it elicits a fruitful understanding of humanity. Therefore, this dissertation occurs at the intersection between ecotheology and theological anthropology, or in other words it is a theological exploration within the domain of theological anthropology through an ecological lens.

Chapter one traces the appearance of ecotheology within contemporary theological reflection, its assessment of the ecological crisis, and the different models or strategies that theologians have explored in order to link ecological challenges and theology. After defining both “ecology” and “ecological crisis”, and identifying some of the manifestations of the latter, the chapter examines the specific rationale of ecotheology and shows how and why it calls into question three main assumptions of classic theological anthropology, namely, the dignity, uniqueness, and role of humanity within creation. It provides a clear understanding of the

status of ecotheology, its particular rationale, and its challenge to standard theological anthropology.

Chapter two turns to the interpretation of *imago Dei*. First, it characterizes and assesses three main historical lines of interpretation: essentialist, functionalist, and relational, which can summarize and group the contributions of those who have offered a theological understanding of *imago Dei*. Then, the chapter proposes the notion of *kenosis* as one sound, meaningful and timely interpretation of this theological motif. Defined as both *making-room or self-limitation* and *self-giving or self-emptying love*, *kenosis* is portrayed through its biblical and systematic usage. The chapter argues that *kenosis* discloses something crucial about God's agency within creation and about Jesus Christ as revelatory of true humanity. Consequently, it can be considered as an inspiring and significant anthropological notion in the context of the current ecological crisis. *Kenosis* not only connects the three classic interpretations of *imago Dei*, but it also serves them as a specifier, inasmuch as it provides concrete content and a precise direction for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. The chapter ends dealing with the main critiques which have been addressed to *kenosis* as a meaningful notion for theological anthropology.

Chapter three is a constructive one. It explores the fruitfulness of *kenosis* and its ability to shed light upon humanity through the three dimensions of ecology: personal, social, and environmental. It shows the inspiring character of *kenosis* as an anthropological image which helps to shape people's imagination, and the way believers portray and make practical sense of the Christian depiction of humanity. First, after highlighting the necessity of ecological conversion and a new ethos, the chapter proposes the notions of limit and asceticism as two

important anthropological features that *kenosis* offers to personal ecology, and that may inspire us in searching and discerning new ways of life. Then, the chapter addresses the issue of the images that may help us in our searching for and voicing new ways of social interaction and life. The concept of “civilization of poverty” coined by philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría is particularly examined. Rooted in the social dimension of ecology, this concept is in tune with the twofold movement of *kenosis* of self-limitation and self-giving love. Finally, the chapter shows how *kenosis* offers a corrective to the notion of stewardship and enhances what is better in it. Inasmuch as the former in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love entails clear practical consequences, it complements greatly the latter, which has become a sort of default position for many theologians. It is shown how this alliance between these two images heightens what is good in each of them, in order to inspire us in discerning and embodying an ecologically friendly lifestyle.

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## I. Introduction

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis asserts that “there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, he also acknowledges that historically “an inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world (...), which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about.”<sup>2</sup> These two assertions, the connection between ecology and anthropology, and the importance of an adequate presentation of Christian doctrine on humanity, prompted and framed this project, whose leading questions are: How can theological anthropology contribute not only to an awareness of the ecological challenges that humanity is facing nowadays, but also to a change of behavior and mentality? Does this field have the theological resources, images and concepts, to embrace this task? If so, what would they be? How should Christian anthropology be presented in order to avoid not only misinterpretations, but also, in particular, any endorsement of a seemingly limitless exploitation of other creatures? How can theological anthropology be a positive source of renewal, inspiration, and discernment for believers in their search of ecologically friendly ways of living? This project, therefore, occurs at the intersection between ecotheology and theological anthropology. It is, in other words, a theological exploration within the domain of theological anthropology through an ecological lens.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, “Laudato Si’. On Care for Our Common Home,” May 24, 2015, no. 118, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., no. 116.

## **A) Ecological and theological context**

Reality challenges theology. Every era raises new questions and implies novel historical processes which demand a theological understanding. Today, a growing ecological sensitivity, among other movements, seeks a fresh theological framework to take into account the rising ecological problems we face, such as global warming and climate change. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis often characterized by its environmental manifestations such as: (a) a depletion of resources, especially those that are not renewable; b) diminishing ecosystems and biodiversity; (c) varied forms of increasing pollution that affect the natural balance, global temperature, and consequently, the climate; and (d) a permanent risk of technological or military disasters associated mostly with nuclear energy.

Three factors are commonly invoked as the root of these current challenges. First, population has grown exponentially over the past century. In the last fifty years, the world's population has approximately tripled, prompting a growing pressure upon the earth in the use of resources and the absorption of waste. Second, scientific research and its technological applications have increasingly amplified the impact of human action upon the earth. For the first time in history, human power threatens the very existence of life, and seems able to alter greatly the conditions and forms of life as we know it. The third factor at the root of the current ecological crisis is the way people conceive of their roles in the world. Neither the number of people, nor their technological and scientific means have triggered the crisis by themselves. At the origin of the crisis, rather, there is a way of living, a lifestyle, undergirded by values and thoughts, which conceive of humanity as the master of nature, and encourage human domination over other creatures.

Many think that this paradigm of dominion is directly related to the heritage of Judaism and Christianity, both of which attribute human beings to have a special place and role within creation. The idea of being created as *imago Dei*, alongside what many have come to believe as the God-given task of ruling over other creatures, seem to be an important cause of our current ecological crisis. Christianity is accused of sustaining an anthropocentric worldview, which has proven detrimental for the earth throughout history. For some authors, therefore, Christian theology needs to be enriched, if not completely transformed, with new perspectives: cosmocentrism, geocentrism, and biocentrism. Denying anthropocentrism, others propose to unfold the proper Christian outlook upon reality which would be theocentric. As a result, the way Christianity speaks of humanity, especially in its relationship with other creatures, is called into question. Hence, theological anthropology needs to explore the sense in which ecological sensitivity affects or modifies, if it does, the Christian narrative about human beings, and their role and place within creation.

This growing ecological awareness denounces the potential ethical ambiguity of affirming a strong sense of human superiority. The notion of *imago Dei* is especially criticized, as it is usually associated with the mandate of subduing and having dominion over the rest of creation found in Genesis (1, 26-28). The theological recognition of human beings as God's image-bearers has been historically a fertile ground not only to affirm human distinctiveness, but also to substantiate exploitative practices that portray other creatures as mere resources to be used for human benefit. Many suspect that the dynamic of differentiation between humans and other creatures has become a source of domination, where the earth and even the cosmos are seen just as the background of the human salvific story. Accordingly, some believe that the

notion of *imago Dei* should be put aside or silenced because of its alleged anthropocentric emphasis and its negative consequences for the relationship between humanity and other creatures. Others essay to show that this notion becomes a threat only when it is interpreted in a particular way that disconnects humanity from the rest of creation and affirms a unique and oppressive superiority of humans over other creatures. What is undeniable is that theological reflection inspired by the current ecological crisis has brought the notion of *imago Dei* to the fore, in order to question and clarify what it conveys about human dignity, uniqueness, and the role of human beings within creation.

#### **B) *Imago Dei* as *Kenosis*: re-imagining humanity**

Accordingly, this thesis is concerned with ecotheology and theological anthropology in general, and, in particular, with the interpretation of *imago Dei* as a source of ecological commitment. More specifically, it is an exploration of the theological idea of *kenosis* as one meaningful, sound, and timely understanding of *imago Dei* within the context of the current ecological crisis. Although criticized for its alleged anthropocentric overtones, the notion of *imago Dei* should not be put aside or silenced, but rather reinterpreted. Understood as *kenosis*, this concept is a source of and not a hindrance for ecological concern and ethical commitment inasmuch as it elicits a fruitful understanding of humanity. Hence, this project is an exploration of *kenosis*, and its capacity to disclose something crucial about being human.

What is meant by exploration is a theological exercise of testing the ability of *kenosis* to reveal crucial aspects of humanity, and to stimulate human beings in their discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life in the midst of the present ecological challenges. It is,

therefore, a constructive theological exercise which is rooted in biblical, dogmatic, and historical resources provided by the Christian tradition. I do not thereby claim to present the final argument about the interpretation of *imago Dei*, but I rather intend to explore one interpretation which seems to be fruitful and timely.

Focusing on *kenosis*, and its capacity to articulate an inspiring understanding of humanity, this thesis asserts the still relevant character of *imago Dei* as a way to structure theological anthropology. Therefore, it states that the significant theological move for dealing with anthropocentric tendencies within Christian doctrine is neither to dismiss this notion nor to expand its classical understanding in order to encompass other creatures. Rather, what is necessary is to reinterpret it so that it carries an ethical component which can illuminate the relation between humanity and other creatures, as well as foster among humans an ecological commitment toward the flourishing of all kinds of life. At the same time, the thesis affirms that this reinterpretation simultaneously aims to both found, and safeguard the dignity of human beings, and to legitimate and promote the human ethical commitment toward the fulfillment of other creatures.

Ecotheology, namely the theological reflection inspired and nurtured by a growing ecological sensitivity, has put into question the notion of *imago Dei* for its historical association with the motif of *dominium terrae*. For some, it is precisely by subduing and ruling the earth that humanity embodies God's image. In this sense, the fact that human beings bear the image of God is not just an expression of their distinctiveness, but it also implies a special task vis-à-vis other creatures, which is characterized by the notions of dominion and subduing. While ecotheology has been reinterpreting these notions and tempering them with other biblical

expressions such as “till” and “guard” which voice humanity’s role within creation, it has also been searching for other root images that may rightly portray the role and task of human beings within the created order. Many are the images and notions that have been proposed and explored in this respect, such as caretakers, guardians, priests of creation, earthkeepers, co-creators, and stewards. Each of these images has its strengths and weaknesses, and discloses a particular understanding of divine agency, the purpose of creation, the relationship between humanity and its Creator, and the role and task of humanity in relation to the rest of creation.

These images, as Ernst Conradie states, are not innocent; they are open to metaphorical innovation and creative usage.<sup>3</sup> They raise the question about a suitable theological narrative able to inspire an ecologically friendly way of living. Indeed, theology needs an adequate presentation of Christian anthropology, one that may help theology to re-imagine humanity in the context of the current ecological crisis. I believe that *imago Dei* understood as *kenosis*, provides one needed overarching image, not only to revise the theological depiction of humanity, but also to help believers to make practical sense of the Christian understanding of the role and place of human beings vis-à-vis other creatures. Defined as both *making-room* or *self-limitation* and *self-giving* or *self-emptying love*, *kenosis* discloses something essential about divine agency, and crucial aspects of humanity in its interaction with other creatures, which can stimulate us in our discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life. *Kenosis* not only helps theology in relating humanity to God, but it also offers a meaningful portrayal of the relationship between human beings and other creatures.

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<sup>3</sup> See Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 217.

### C) Argument and Methodology

Three assumptions guide both the argument of this project and the organization of its chapters. First, *imago Dei* must be viewed and interpreted through the lens of Christology, in line with the biblical stance that presents Christ as the true image of God. Hence, this project assumes as a starting point the statement of the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *the truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light* (GS 22). Historically, the notion of *imago Dei* has never been univocally understood, and the history of its interpretation revolves around three main perspectives: substantialist, relational, and functionalist. Since Vatican II, the theology of *imago Dei* has experienced a revival. Nevertheless, it is primarily the trinitarian understanding of this concept, and not the Christological, that has been explored by ecotheology. In this sense, the most common stance has been to propose the intra-Trinitarian mode of relationship as the paradigm of humanity. If God is to be understood as persons-in-mutual-relationship, then human beings, made in the image of the triune God, are to be understood as persons-in-mutual-relationship. Instead, this dissertation aims to unfold the Christological understanding of *imago Dei* as a crucial resource for the needed renovation of theological anthropology in the midst of the current ecological crisis, and as an important source to legitimate and sustain ecological commitment.

The interpretation of *imago Dei* as *kenosis* will be therefore based on the exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus' *kenosis* not only has revealed God's true nature, but it has also disclosed what being created in the image of God and bearing God's likeness mean for humanity. In this sense, the twofold movement of Jesus' *kenosis* – self-limitation and self-giving

– elucidates what the notion of *imago Dei* implies for humanity. The only way through which human beings can be the image of God is by becoming the image of Christ, who is the true image of God. What Jesus' *kenosis* shows is that what is really almighty in God is God's love, because God is power-in-love, and this love does not threaten but rather is precisely what enables creatures to unfold and move toward their fulfillment. Therefore, as it will be shown, the Christological understanding of *kenosis* has to be the normative understanding, which governs all other theological uses of this notion. This understanding evinces both the dynamic and performative character of the image, which is not only susceptible of being renewed – this is what Christ has accomplished – but it also entails consequences for humanity in its relationship with other creatures.

The second assumption is that the theological rationale about humanity is to be preferred as a theological starting point over other scientific approaches. It is not a matter of religious fundamentalism that despises scientific research and claims a literal understanding of the Scriptures which would provide the proper explanation of reality. In the wake of Rahner's assertion about theological anthropology, I aim to explore how the notion of *kenosis* can disclose, in a radical and critical form, something about humanity which can be expressed differently through other disciplines. This thesis assumes that an adequate interpretation of *imago Dei* requires a well-founded theological perspective, and not merely an understanding based on other scientific or philosophical approaches. Consequently, the expected renewal of theological anthropology, in the face of the ecological challenges we are dealing with, has to be carried out through theological resources: biblical, systematic, and historical. These own resources can guide theology in its revision of those elements that have given rise to a wrong

understanding of the relationship between human beings and other creatures. Moreover, they can enable theology to unfold an ecologically friendly depiction of humanity, and to inspire believers in their search and discernment of new ways of life. As a result, theology will be equipped to perform its double task of a Christian critique of the values, beliefs, and practices that underlie the ecological crisis, on the one hand, and the ecological reformation of Christianity both in its teaching and in its practice, on the other.

Accordingly, this thesis proposes that the notion of *kenosis* must come to the fore in theological reflection on humanity before the current ecological crisis. It is a meaningful, sound, and timely interpretation of *imago Dei*, which not only intertwines the substantialist, relational, and functional understanding of what it means to be God's image-bearers, but it also serves them as specifier, giving them specific content and orientation. It is Jesus' own *kenosis* that reveals the true face of divine power – power in love – which decidedly aims at the well-being and fulfillment of creation. This twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love can certainly inspire a desirable renovation in theological anthropology. We need a new way of portraying humanity in relationship with other creatures and inhabiting the world. We are also looking for new ways of living that may lead us to a true and fruitful life. *Kenosis* offers us a meaningful and timely image; one that deserves to be considered and deepened in the face of the challenges we are to deal with nowadays.

The third assumption that guides both the argument of this project and the organization of its chapters is that ecology cannot be reduced merely to its environmental dimension. The environmental challenges that humanity is currently facing are just a symptom or manifestation of a wider and deeper ecological crisis. This is important to keep in mind, for the way in which

the notion of ecology is understood determines, so to speak, the way in which the ecological crisis is acknowledged and defined. Yet, some exhibit a tendency to describe the ecological crisis only through its environmental manifestations. In some cases, the notion of ecology and environment seem even to be interchangeable. Nevertheless, the disproportionate suffering of those who are the most marginalized and impoverished must be considered as part of any discussion of ecology. Environmental concerns should not overshadow other challenges such as hunger, poverty, overcrowding, overconsumption, forced migration, and lifestyle integrity, which are also part of the current ecological crisis. While human flourishing should not be disconnected from the life and welfare of other creatures, caring for the earth should not mean that human beings are ignored or forgotten. The notion of environment is certainly related to the notion of ecology, but it does not exhaust its significance.

Therefore, the notion of ecology must be understood to have at least three dimensions: personal, social, and environmental. It is not only wider than the notion of environment, but entails, in addition a personal and a social component. If ecology refers to interaction and interrelatedness, then it has to take into account all human dimensions of relationality, without confining itself just to the human-nature relationship. Therefore, “personal” and “social,” as well as “environmental,” are dimensions that necessarily pertain to an ecological analysis of human existence. If ecology relates to the way humanity both thinks of and embodies its inhabitance on the earth, it has to do, therefore, with the person in its social and environmental interactions. In a certain sense, all human life and experience is an ecological event. It will be accordingly shown that *kenosis* enables theology to activate and foster discernments within the spheres of personal, social, and environmental ecology, which not only can change views that

disconnect human beings from the rest of creation by ascribing to them an ambiguous dominion over other creatures, but also can lead us toward more ecologically friendly ways of living.

#### **D) Overview of the chapters**

Chapter one traces the appearance of ecotheology within contemporary theological reflection, its assessment of the ecological crisis, and the different models or strategies that theologians have explored in order to link ecological challenges and theology. The chapter proposes a broad understanding of ecology as the way human beings not only grasp, but also imagine, their mode of inhabitance on the earth. Ecology has to do, therefore, with the manner in which humanity both thinks of its presence and role within creation, and also draws the theoretical and practical consequences of its dependence on and interrelatedness with all other beings. In this sense, ecology cannot be reduced merely to its environmental dimension, but it rather has a personal and social component as well. Accordingly, the ecological crisis refers to a critical moment in which our lifestyle and the values that sustain it are being judged and called into question for their destructive results. It is a crisis inasmuch as we are confronted with current and future life-threatening scenarios, which can be seen as unavoidable consequences of human practices and beliefs, and humanity needs, therefore, to make a decision about it. The manifestations of the crisis that are studied within the chapter show the tight interconnection between the personal, social, and environmental components of ecology.

After defining both “ecology” and “ecological crisis”, and identifying some of the manifestations of the latter, the chapter examines the specific rationale of ecotheology and

shows how and why it calls into question three main assumptions of classic theological anthropology, namely, the dignity, uniqueness, and role of humanity within creation. Despite its lack of definite method, ecotheology has grown as an independent field within theological reflection, and has unfolded around some methodological tools such as the dialogue with scientific accounts of life and cosmology, some specific themes, some general strategies, and an overarching sensitivity that tries to take into account the challenge which the ecological crisis represents for theology. In dealing with this challenge, theology needs not only practical criteria but also inspiring and sound images about human life upon the earth that may enlighten our discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life. The chapter provides a clear understanding of the status of ecotheology, its particular rationale, and its challenge to standard theological anthropology.

Chapter two turns to the interpretation of *imago Dei*. First, it characterizes and assesses three main historical lines of interpretation: substantialist, functionalist, and relational, which can summarize and group the contributions of those who have offered a theological understanding of *imago Dei*. Then, the chapter proposes the notion of *kenosis* as one sound, meaningful and timely interpretation of this theological motif. Defined as both *making-room or self-limitation and self-giving or self-emptying love*, *kenosis* is portrayed through its biblical and systematic usage. A thorough exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11 structures this second part of the chapter. As to the systematic use of *kenosis*, recourse will be made to Jürgen Moltmann, and Denis Edwards.

The chapter argues that *kenosis* discloses something crucial about God's agency within creation and about Jesus Christ as revelatory of true humanity. Consequently, it can be

considered as an inspiring and significant anthropological notion in the context of the current ecological crisis. *Kenosis* not only connects the three classic interpretations of *imago Dei*, but it also serves as a specifier for them, inasmuch as it provides concrete content and a precise direction for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. The chapter ends dealing with the main critiques which have been addressed to *kenosis* as a meaningful notion for theological anthropology.

Chapter three is a constructive one. It explores the fruitfulness of *kenosis* and its ability to shed light upon humanity through the three dimensions of ecology: personal, social, and environmental. It shows the inspiring character of *kenosis* as an anthropological image which helps to shape people's imagination, and the way believers portray and make practical sense of the Christian depiction of humanity.

First, after highlighting the necessity of ecological conversion and of a new ethos, the chapter proposes the notions of limit and asceticism as two important anthropological features that *kenosis* offers to personal ecology, which may inspire us in searching and discerning new ways of life. Then, the chapter addresses the issue of the images that may help us in our searching for and voicing new ways of social interaction and life. The concept of "civilization of poverty," coined by philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría, is particularly examined. Rooted in the social dimension of ecology, this concept is in tune with the twofold movement of *kenosis* of self-limitation and self-giving love. Finally, the chapter shows how *kenosis* both offers a corrective to the notion of stewardship, and enhances what is already good in it. Inasmuch as the former in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love entails clear practical consequences, it complements greatly the latter, which has become a sort of default position for many

theologians. The chapter shows how this alliance between these two images heightens what is good in each of them, in order to inspire us in discerning and embodying an ecologically friendly lifestyle.

## **II. Ecotheology Challenges Classic Theological Anthropology: Dignity,**

### **Uniqueness, and the Role of Humanity within Creation**

Contemporary concern for the environment has developed and intensified over the last decades. Understood as a turn to ecology, this concern has its theological manifestation in what has been properly called ecotheology. The latter offers its own perspective on the ecological debate through a retrieval, critique, and deepening of religious symbols and traditions.<sup>4</sup> This chapter consists of tracing the appearance of ecotheology within Christian contemporary theological reflection, its assessment of the ecological crisis, and the different models or strategies that theologians have explored in order to link ecological challenges and theological reasoning. The principal goal of this chapter is to unveil the specific rationale of ecotheology and to show how and why it calls into question three main assumptions of classic Christian theological anthropology, namely, the dignity, uniqueness, and role of humanity within creation. The chapter aims to provide a clear understanding of the status of ecotheology, its particular rationale, and its challenge to standard theological anthropology. It is worth noting that this challenge has not been widely received. It is not uncommon to encounter theology books and reflections about humanity which ignore these themes, and which seem to assume that the mystery of humanity can be theologically unfolded without any apparent reference to

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<sup>4</sup> Some multi-religious projects have explored the ways in which different religious traditions deal with ecological challenges. It is worth noting, among the most important, the Religions of the World and Ecology Book Series edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Harvard University Press) which is the outcome of a two-year conference series (1996-98) hosted by the Center for the Study of World Religions at the Harvard Divinity School. This ten-volume publication examines the ecological implications of the beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and doctrines of various world religions in order to discover what they might offer to both the larger interdisciplinary dialogue on the environmental crisis and to the more immediate, pragmatic aspects of public policy and environmental ethics.

the rest of creation. When this relationship is mentioned, it is at best usually one-sidedly reduced to the notion of *dominium terrae*.

## A) The Emergence of Ecotheology: a Theological Assessment of the Ecological Crisis

### 1. The rise of ecotheology

The rise of Christian ecotheology does not have a precise date of birth. Some relate its appearance to the article authored by the medieval historian Lynn White in which he states the responsibility of the Jewish-Christian mindset for the origin of our contemporary ecological crisis.<sup>5</sup> This religious framework, according to him, holds an anthropocentric vision of reality which has demythologized the world, allowed the appearance of modern science along with its technological application, and, finally, has stressed a privileged role and position of humanity within creation with exploitative consequences. According to White, Christianity “is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”<sup>6</sup> White’s thesis has greatly influenced the subsequent theological reflection about ecology, to the extent that the two main centers of gravity of the latter have been chiefly the degree of anthropocentrism of the Christian narratives and the relationship between worldviews and practices.

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<sup>5</sup> In this famous article Lynn White points out that the notion of *imago Dei* is one of the elements of the Jewish-Christian mindset that is at the root of our current ecological crisis. The other elements being the linear conception of time, the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, the mandate of dominion over the other creatures which humanity receives from God, and the search for understanding God's mind as one religious motivation in scientific investigation. All these factors have demythologized the earth and fostered the development of science and its technological application triggering the current ecological crisis. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1205.

White's thesis has been highly criticized and countered.<sup>7</sup> The contentious points are mainly four. First, it is said that White's interpretation of biblical teaching regarding creation is partial and inaccurate. He focuses on a few texts (Gn 1, 26-28), and he does not construe them against the background of biblical scriptures in order to balance the alleged mandate to dominate the rest of creation which humanity receives from God. Second, his assertion that the Jewish-Christian worldview is at the roots of the appearance of modern western science and technology is at least arguable. Third, his main argument presupposes that environmental destruction has streamed mainly from western culture, which is historically inexact. Other cultures have suffered from ecological degradation without any Christian influence.<sup>8</sup> Finally, White overlooks other historical factors that have contributed to the current ecological crisis and to which we should also turn our attention.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this criticism, others have followed the same path in pointing at religion and the Jewish-Christian worldview as one of the main sources of our current ecological crisis. Arnold Toynbee, for instance, states that monotheism – and Christianity as a monotheistic religion – is the deepest historical cause of some of the main problems of our societies nowadays, such as pollution and resource scarcity. Monotheism has put an end to the ancient belief in nature's

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Jeremy Cohen, "The Bible, Man, and Nature in the History of Western Thought: A Call for Reassessment," *The Journal of Religion* 65, no. 2 (April 1, 1985): 155–72; Lewis W. Moncrief, "The Cultural Basis of Our Environmental Crisis," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub, 1973), 31–42; and Rene Dubos, "A Theology of the Earth," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub, 1973), 43–54, and *A God Within* (New York: Macmillan Pub Co, 1973), chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*, Rev Upd edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Some other historical factors that have influenced the current ecological crisis are: 1. The change in the notion of nature from the Greek *physis* to the Latin *natura*, which already implies a distance between humanity and other beings; 2. Cartesian dualism (*res cogitans*, *res extensa*) and the positivist approach to reality which that entails; 3. Capitalism and the Industrial revolution. See, for instance, Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña, *Teología de la creación* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1996), chapter 6.

divinity. The latter was a decisive limit to human greed and exploitative practices toward nature. Therefore, in order to face and overcome what seems to be a pathway toward an irreversible disaster, humanity must abandon monotheism and return to a pantheistic worldview, which is not only older but was once also universal.<sup>10</sup> The former Catholic theologian Eugen Drewermann asserts as well that Christian radical anthropocentrism is the major source of human destruction of nature.<sup>11</sup> Christianity has shaped this anthropocentric stance from Hebrew and Greco-Roman influences. From the former, it gets the idea that nature is a kind of enemy which has to submit itself to human and divine will. Humanity is explicitly entrusted to rule over the earth as God rules over it (Gn 1:26-8). From the Greco-Roman culture, Christianity inherits both the idea of nature as an ensemble of rational laws and the will to govern it. This one-sided emphasis on rationality distanced humans from external nature and from their own bodies with disastrous consequences. Drewermann thinks that the Christocentrism of the New Testament deepens rather than softens Christian anthropocentrism inasmuch as the idea that God has become human in Christ strengthens the privileged position of humanity within creation. It implies as well that God is concerned with the fate of each individual and not just with the fate of a people in general, as Christ himself has been an individual. In this sense, Christianity eventually makes the entire fate of nature dependent on humans. For, given that all creatures are allegedly punished because of Adam's sin, they need human collaboration in order to be redeemed. Drewermann states that the radical

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<sup>10</sup> See Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3, no. 1–4 (1972): 141–46.

<sup>11</sup> See Eugen Drewermann, *Le progrès meurtrier : La destruction de la nature et de l'être humain à la lumière de l'héritage du christianisme* (Paris: Stock, 1994).

anthropocentric worldview of Christianity has had devastating consequences for both human-nature and the human-human relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Other theologians think that ecotheology has developed not primarily as a reaction to the criticism that set Christianity at the roots of the ecological crisis, but it has progressively emerged rather through the dialogue between theology and the new ecological sensitivity. In this sense, ecotheology would have its origin in the pioneering work of some figures such as Teilhard de Chardin and Joseph Sittler. Sittler, for instance, has been theologizing in an ecological mode since the 50's, well before the recent awareness of the environmental challenges and their wide analysis from a theological viewpoint. Since the beginning, he has unfolded his career with ecological concerns in mind. For Peter Bakken, for instance, Sittler is, on the one hand, an indication of how an earth-affirming theology runs deeper than the simple desire to defend Christianity against the charge of being responsible for the ecological crisis, and, on the other hand, "a good antidote to the repetitiveness, dullness, and stridency of much Christian ecotheological writing."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, even though White's article is a milestone in the formation of ecotheology, inasmuch as it entails a defensive attitude within religious circles that fosters theological reflection about Christianity and nature, ecotheology does not historically begin as a mere apologetic endeavor.

Others assert that ecotheology had not been really shaped until the final decade of the last century. Prior to the 1990's there is certainly some theological reflection on ecology and theology. In this sense, it is worth noting the work of some theologians such as Paul Santmire,

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<sup>12</sup> See Matthias Beier, *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), especially chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter W. Bakken, eds., *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 18–19.

Jürgen Moltmann, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, John Cobb, and a few others, who had already indicated the importance of linking ecological challenges and theological reasoning. Nonetheless, ecotheology as a field of research and teaching came later. Heather Eaton, for instance, gives the credit for stimulating and consolidating the field of ecotheology to the work of what became the Forum on Religion and Ecology, currently at Yale University in the USA.<sup>14</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, in the wake of the work of Thomas Berry and inspired by him, have been encouraging and supporting for the last twenty years on-going thinking about the intersection of religions and ecology.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the differences on how the history of ecotheology is told, and on how far its origins are traced back, there are some common traits in these accounts that can be identified. First of all, ecotheology is not just a reactive effort that aims to defend the relevance of Christianity and its contribution to ecologically friendly practices, against those who blame it for being one of the main sources of current environmental challenges. Ecotheology does not arise just as a response of what has been called the “ecological complaint” against Christianity. Secondly, ecotheology has been historically fashioned through the encounter of theological reflection and the rising ecological awareness.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, ecotheology is the manifestation

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<sup>14</sup> See Heather Eaton, “Mapping Ecotheologies: Deliberations on Difference,” *Theology* 116, no. 1 (2013): 23–27.

<sup>15</sup> See note 1. The Forum on Religion and Ecology (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/>), has already its counterparts in Canada: <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/fore/> (FORE, Forum on Religion and Ecology), and in Europe <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/relnateur/> (The European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment). See also Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Intellectual and Organizational Foundations of Religion and Ecology,” in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon, and Kevin O’Brien (New York: Routledge, 2010), 81–95, and John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), chap. 5.

<sup>16</sup> One may examine the evolution of this worldwide ecological awareness through the key notions and emphasis of some of its milestones, namely: from ‘limits to growth’ (the MIT report to the Club of Rome, 1972), to ‘sustainable development’ (the Brundtland report, 1987; the World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002), to the social dimensions of eco-justice (at least from Rio de Janeiro, 1992), to reflections on carrying capacity (or footprints) and the ability of the biosphere to absorb the waste products of the industrialized economy (Kyoto,

within theology of a much larger process of a new ecological awareness, which has pervaded not only other fields of knowledge but also human practices and beliefs. Ecological sensitivity has been permeating not only the political arena but also other aspects of human life such as education, economy, arts, city planning, and daily practices. Christian ecotheology has been increasingly trying to take into account this new consciousness and its implications from a theological viewpoint. Thirdly, even though Lynn White's article should not be defined as the starting point of ecotheology, it has undoubtedly influenced the way in which theology has framed its reflection about ecology. White's thesis has undeniably been a catalyst for ecotheology. It has impacted the subsequent debate to the extent that two of its main foci have been the degree of anthropocentrism of Christianity and therefore its responsibility in the ecological crisis, and the way that worldviews and ecologically friendly practices mutually affect one another. Last, but not least, it is undeniable that a new theological field has been consistently growing up in the last fifty years. Since roughly the middle of the past century, Christian theological reflection has been increasingly interested in what can be called ecological issues, and it has developed different strategies in order both to connect environmental challenges with Christian doctrine, and to foster ecological commitment among believers. A significant amount of publications, research projects, and authors have been exploring both the criticism which ecological sensitivity raises against the classical Christian mindset and the resources which can be found in the Christian tradition in order to nurture an ecologically friendly worldview and practice. These publications and authors, grouped under the rubric of

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1997), to the recognition of the limits to induce the required political and social change (after Copenhagen, 2009). See Ernst Conradie, "The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology: A Collective Mapping of the Terrain," *Theology* 116, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 4–17, at 5. To this it should be added the agreement on seventeen worldwide sustainable development goals defined at Paris in 2015.

what has been called ecotheology, allow for a Christian critique of the cultural habits underlying ecological destruction, and for an ecological reform of Christianity.

In addition to ecotheology, other names have been used in labeling this theological endeavor, such as environmental theology, ecological theology, eco-theology, and theology of ecology.<sup>17</sup> Whatever label one wishes to use, it is without doubt that Christian theology has been increasingly exploring the link between Christianity and ecology, and that this has generated a new field within theological reflection, which has coalesced around a growing number of publications,<sup>18</sup> theological journals,<sup>19</sup> and authors.

One may ask therefore about the main questions that both characterize and frame ecotheology, and shape its specificity. Assuming the seriousness of the current ecological challenges, ecotheology explores what the role of Christianity has been and could be vis-à-vis this context. Can Christianity contribute not only to an awareness of the ecological challenges that humanity is facing, but also to a change of behavior and mentality? Does it have the theological resources to embrace this task? What would they be? What are the needed

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<sup>17</sup> This dissertation will use the term of ecotheology in referring to this new field within theological reasoning. This notion was coined and popularized by David G. Hallman, a former president of the World Council of Churches [see, for instance, David G. Hallman, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (WCC Publications, 1994.)]. It has the advantage of clearly relating ecology, economy, and ecumenism through the Greek root *oikos*, and therefore of depicting creation as a home. Environmental theology is discarded inasmuch as the notion of ecology is a much more inclusive notion than the notion of environment. Although other labels which use the adjective ecological are not discarded, they seem less suitable inasmuch as this adjective is much more appropriate when describing things and processes rather than an academic discipline.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, these three bibliographic compendia: Peter W. Bakken, J. Ronald Engel, and Joan G. Engel, *Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature*, annotated edition (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1995), which surveys bibliography from 1961 to 1993; *Christianity and Ecology Bibliography. Bibliography and annotations by*: Peter W. Bakken Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies and The Forum for Religion and Ecology, 2011: <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/bibliography/>; and Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology. Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch, South Africa: SunPress, 2006), or within the same website.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, which is the official journal of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture. This Journal is the continuation of *Ecotheology*, which was published from 1996 to 2007. See also *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*.

revisions and/or retrievals of some of its doctrines and traditions that Christianity needs to embrace in dealing with this ecological crisis? Does this crisis truly require this kind of amendment within Christianity? Can the rising ecological sensitivity be articulated in a coherent way of thinking and approaching reality from a theological viewpoint?

Revision, retrieval, transformation, and deepening can be the terms which best describe the goals which ecotheology has assumed over the last decades. In order to activate the dialogue between Christian tradition and ecological sensitivity, theologians have explored different theological pathways such as: 1) rethinking the notion of dominion and reinterpreting the God-given task specified in Genesis. It is clear that the biblical text does not substantiate a limitless exploitation of nature; 2) searching for new and inspiring root metaphors which can portray both the God-creation relationship (divine agency) and the link between humanity and the rest of creation, on the one hand, and stimulate ecologically friendly deeds, on the other hand; 3) exposing other biblical patterns than Genesis and other theological traditions – practice included – which go beyond the apparently hierarchical view of reality and any kind of dualism which subordinates matter to spirit; 4) defining the proper Christian source for the value of creatures; and finally, 5) proposing an array of ethical principles and practical criteria which can enrich both people's discernment and decision-making processes in their searching for pathways to a true and fruitful life. In this sense, Christian ecotheology's development has, by and large, traced an arc from a rejection of the license to exploit the environment, to responsible and enlightened stewardship, to friendship and sacrament as models of conceiving the relationship of humans to the environment.

At the heart of this development lies the conviction that ecotheology should not be reduced to environmental ethics, and that a merely pragmatic approach to ecological challenges has to be avoided. Christian ecotheology must certainly explain, on properly theological grounds, why and how ecological sensitivity is essential for believers. In doing so, ecotheology needs to revise its understanding of God, creation, nature, and what it means to be human, in order to nurture an ecologically friendly theology. The call for an ecological pragmatism, which brackets theoretical debates in order to agree on practical strategies and principles, has two main problems. First, it misunderstands the real depth of the difference and diversity among theological stances and their practical consequences. Second, it loses its capacity to critique the ways issues are framed, or to isolate new problems.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, ecotheology aims to assess the ecological crisis in its religious dimension. It undertakes this task by bringing to the fore the theological responsibility in those factors which have originated, increased, and supported the challenges we face nowadays. It also explores the theological resources – biblical, systematic, and those from tradition – which provide a helpful and timely framework in addressing ecological concern.

## **2. Ecological crisis: what does it mean?**

Having acknowledged the existence of ecotheology within theological reflection as a new and growing field, and having sketched out the main questions that shape its theological endeavor, one may ask about the context which has triggered its appearance and fostered its development. I turn now, therefore, to those challenges that have awakened a rising ecological

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<sup>20</sup> See Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34–40.

sensitivity since last century<sup>21</sup> and which constitute what has been labeled as an ecological crisis.

Global institutions such as the UN, national leaders, intellectuals from different disciplines, and citizens grouped in a large variety of associations, have come to acknowledge that we are dealing with what could be called an interlocking crisis.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, the current environmental challenges are just symptomatic of a larger crisis, one that involves a lack of moral vision, imagination, moral character, will, and leadership.<sup>23</sup> This crisis of values questions some of the presuppositions and assumptions upon which especially western societies have built their welfare and development. There is, on the one hand, a sense of urgency that something has to be done if we do not want to further endanger the viability of life of all creatures on the earth. On the other hand, some believe that humanity is currently paralyzed by its inability to react due to its uncertainty about the future<sup>24</sup> or due to the excess of

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that there was no ecological awareness before that time. People like John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Aldo Leopold, in the American context, are a good example of an early ecological concern. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this awareness has been heightened since roughly the middle of the last century. There are good accounts of the rising of this ecological awareness and movement. See, for instance, Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1987), (the document is broadly known as The Brundtland report): n. 11. "Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalized within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade), and within broad areas of concern (environment, economics, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to the various global 'crises' that have seized public concern, particularly over the past decade. *These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one.*" (italics mine)

<sup>23</sup> See Ernst Conradie, "Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology: An Intercontinental Dialogue," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (February 24, 2007): 281–343, at 286.

<sup>24</sup> See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), especially chapter 2. Proposing a heuristics of fear, Jonas thinks that humanity is diminished in its capacity to deal with the ecological challenges because of the uncertainty and contradictions about the real future consequences of our acts. This uncertainty affects the applicability of the ethical principles, such as the principle of precaution.

confidence in its own scientific and technical resources.<sup>25</sup> It is sufficiently clear as well (as the ongoing negotiations within the UN of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have shown) that this paralysis is also related to potential economic consequences from resolutions and agreements, and political power and strategy among the nations. The agreement reached at Paris (2015) on seventeen worldwide sustainable development goals is a clear expression of the fact that environmental challenges are just one manifestation, perhaps the most evident, of what is felt as an unacceptable present. Many say that the future which the climate change seems to imply provides a gloomy example of what can and has gone wrong. In this sense, it can be rightly said that the environmental challenges epitomize a wider ecological crisis.

The notion of crisis is explicitly avoided by some authors, for it has often been used as a rhetorical, polemical device for particular political purposes.<sup>26</sup> It is true that it can also evoke apocalyptic imagery, and fatalistic feelings that often elicit fear and seldom kindle hope. Yet, it conveys a sense of urgency and a call to action which are kept veiled in other ways of referring to the current ecological challenges. A consideration of its etymology can help us both in unfolding its scope and in showing what I want to emphasize by using it.

The notion of crisis comes from the Greek word *κρίσις* and signifies, literally, decision. Originally related to the sphere of health, it has been expanded to the domain of morality to connote a momentous phase within the evolution of events and ideas. This phase is usually

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<sup>25</sup> See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour Un Catastrophisme Éclairé. Quand L'impossible Est Certain* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), and *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis* (Paris: Seuil, 2005). In these books the French engineer and philosopher, who is also professor at Stanford University, analyzes what he calls “*orgueil métaphysique*” (metaphysical pride) which is basically the denial of what we know about scenarios of the future. According to Dupuy this pride is rooted in humanity’s confidence in scientific research and its future technological applications. It is metaphysical because it does not truly believe in the existence of the future already predicted, which is therefore beyond reality.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008), 1.

characterized by the rupture of a given balance which can be followed by an improvement of the situation or by its deterioration.<sup>27</sup> The Greek notion of crisis has also the meaning of judgment. Labeling this time as an ecological crisis means therefore, that we are living a crucial moment in which our lifestyle and the values that have grounded it are being judged and called into question. We need to make a decision with regard to the future scenarios which can be predicted from our current practices and beliefs. We are confronted then with a vitally important moment – a turning-point – which cannot be evaded or ignored. Denying the complexity of the ecological challenges that humanity is dealing with is already a form of decision and judgment vis-à-vis reality.

The notion of ecology does not have a univocal meaning.<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is best understood as an idea that can be shaped in different ways depending on the context in which it is used. Ecology is a “culture of layers and mosaics”<sup>29</sup> that admits at least a scientific and a more comprehensive definition. The German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) is credited with having coined this word in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a call to a new science based on the Darwinian idea of natural selection, and oriented to the study of beings in their relationships with their environments. Haeckel thought that this study of the natural world

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<sup>27</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition: “1. *Pathol.* The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse; also applied to any marked or sudden variation occurring in the progress of a disease and to the phenomena accompanying it; .... and, 3. *Trans. and fig.* A vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied *esp.* to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce; 4. Judgment, decision.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> See some contemporary discussions about the notion of ecology which can be consulted: Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax, *Ecology Revisited: Reflecting on Concepts, Advancing Science* (New York: Springer, 2011); Stanley I. Dodson et al., *Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert P. McIntosh, *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and “Pluralism in Ecology,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 18 (January 1, 1987): 321–41.

<sup>29</sup> Astrid Schwarz, “History of Concepts for Ecology,” in *Ecology Revisited: Reflecting on Concepts, Advancing Science*, ed. Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax (New York: Springer, 2011), 22.

would provide not only scientific information, but it would also unveil the inner order of nature and something about the virtues with which humanity might live in harmony. This scientific approach would offer therefore the deepest truth of the cosmos. So, ecology for Haeckel was, from the beginning, “both a natural science and a worldview.”<sup>30</sup> In this sense, Haeckel’s understanding of ecology is useful as starting point in any discussion about this notion, inasmuch as it connects from the outset the spheres of science and morality. His understanding of ecology combines scientific as well as philosophical claims.

From a scientific point of view, ecology is usually defined as the study of the interrelationships among organisms and between organisms, and between them and all aspects, living and non-living, of their environment.<sup>31</sup> This scientific endeavor focuses therefore on the interconnectedness among all beings, and aims to unveil the way in which they interact with and affect each other within their concrete and specific contexts. This implies, on the one hand, that ecology requires the collaboration of various scientific disciplines. Indeed, it has been conceived from the start as a “bridging science.”<sup>32</sup> The complex web of interactions among all beings, and among them and their environments, cannot be fully depicted without the participation of a large array of scientific approaches. On the other hand, this implies that ecology tends inevitably to specialization. Scientists do not aim to be experts in ecology as a general term. They rather restrict their investigations to particular species in given contexts, and to a limited set of variables. In all of these cases, ecology is always about the interaction and relation between organisms and their environments. The focus of research is typically

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<sup>30</sup> Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon, and Kevin O’Brien, eds., *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 49.

<sup>31</sup> See Michael Allaby, *A Dictionary of Ecology*, 4 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Schwarz, “History of Concepts for Ecology,” 22.

narrowed down by different strategies, e.g., naming the object or region of study, or establishing the methods or scale of attention which are used. In this sense, ecology as a science can be divided into different branches according to criteria such as: disease, animal, marine, artic ecology; or physiological, behavioral, population, and ecosystems ecology. This is not to say that there are clear-cut boundaries and that there are not blurred zones in the interaction among these scientific approaches to reality. The scientific definition of ecology and the categorization of its sub-disciplines is still an ongoing process, which has been rendered more complex, especially with the rise of the environmental movement.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to this scientific understanding, ecology is also conceived of in a broader sense. As was mentioned above, Haeckel thinks about ecology not only in terms of a scientific endeavor, but also as it were as a comprehensive worldview. In this sense, ecology would progressively unveil a cosmic truth – the deep web of interactions and mutual influences among organisms and their environments – which would help humanity to live in harmony with nature. Rooted in the scientific ecological discoveries, philosophers, ecological activists, and other theoreticians such as theologians nowadays hold this broader understanding of ecology.<sup>34</sup>

It has become a new cultural paradigm which affirms as its first and principal tenet the interconnectedness of all beings. If everything is connected and interrelated, then humanity is

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Kurt Jax, “Stabilizing a Concept,” in *Ecology Revisited: Reflecting on Concepts, Advancing Science*, ed. Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax (New York: Springer, 2011), 161–70, and Andrew Jamison, “Ecology and the Environmental Movement,” in *Ecology Revisited: Reflecting on Concepts, Advancing Science*, ed. Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax (New York: Springer, 2011), 195–204.

<sup>34</sup> The works of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and the American historian and political theoretician Murray Bookchin are, among many others, an example of the use of the notion of ecology against a philosophical background. While the former coined the notion of “deep ecology,” distinguishing it from a “shallow ecology,” the latter is at the origins of what has been called social ecology. See, for instance, Alan Drengson and Bill Devall, eds., *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), and Murray Bookchin, “What Is Social Ecology?,” in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al., 4 edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004), 462–78.

dependent on other beings as well as on natural systems.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, these are not optional relationships. They rather give rise to humanity's constitution and identity. Ecology as a cultural paradigm confronts therefore both the depiction of humans as isolated individuals and the classic emphasis on human singularity vis-à-vis other species. Assuming as a starting point the interconnectedness of everything, this broader understanding of ecology aims to unfold the consequences of this universal relatedness not only for the human understanding of reality but also for its praxis.

In summary, the notion of ecology refers etymologically to the global understanding of all the processes which constitute the multiple relationships between living beings – humans included – and their bio-physical and social environment. In a broader sense, it can be understood as the way human beings not only grasp but also imagine their mode of inhabitance on the earth. Ecology has to do therefore with the manner in which humanity both thinks of its presence and role within creation, and draws the theoretical and practical consequences of its dependence on and relatedness with all other beings. In this sense, ecology cannot be reduced merely to its environmental dimension, but it rather has a personal and social component as well.

This reflection about the notion of ecology entails four main conclusions for theology and the way it should frame the current ecological crisis. First of all, the broader understanding of ecology which is used beyond the realm of science must be informed by and rooted in scientific discoveries and assertions about reality. The more the philosophical or theological

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<sup>35</sup> Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* is a good example both of this broader understanding of ecology, and of the recognition of the inherent interconnectedness of all beings. Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," May 24, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

depiction of ecology is disconnected from the scientific portrayal of reality, the bigger the risk of holding a romanticized and false picture of the earth and natural processes. This is not to say that science must back up theological assertions, or that theology is tied up with the scientific viewpoint of reality and has to derive or read off values from the natural world. It is rather to affirm that these two understandings of ecology should not be disjointed, and that the philosophical or theological one shall take into account, as one of its indispensable starting points, what science believes to be true about nature. From a slightly different perspective it can be said that there is no such a thing as neutral scientific knowledge devoid of moral consequences, and theology has to both disclose these moral implications and evaluate them.

Many have noticed that some philosophical and theological understandings of ecology are inadequately informed by science. These understandings of ecology still assume, for instance, that nature's main feature is balance or equilibrium, which does not fit the current scientific portrayal. While these philosophical and theological approaches portray nature as something stable, the scientific approach underlines the notions of change and flux in its description of natural processes.<sup>36</sup> A false, romanticized depiction of nature supposes that nature possesses the enduring capacity to regain balance and stability after a period of disturbance, and that human agency should respect and not alter in any way this natural equilibrium. Scientifically inaccurate understandings of ecology often imply ethical and theological imperatives that are inappropriate. Lisa Sideris states, for instance, that the belief that humanity is duty bound to reduce suffering and restore peace in nature is an example of how an inaccurate or incomplete

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<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin, "Beyond Lynn White: Religion, the Contexts of Ecology, and the Flux of Nature," in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, ed. David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 1–25.

picture of nature leads to questionable environmental action.<sup>37</sup> The way in which theology refers to nature by means of notions such as those of complexity, richness of experience, suffering, violence, cooperation, balance and stability, must be scientifically informed. Otherwise theology can be misleading not only for our understanding of the nature and challenges of the ecological crisis, but also for our searching and discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life.

The second conclusion is that the notion of ecology should not be equated with the notion of environment. The former is certainly broader than the latter. The environmental challenges that humanity is currently facing are just a symptom or manifestation of a wider and deeper ecological crisis. This is important to keep in mind, for the way in which the notion of ecology is understood determines, so to speak, the way in which the ecological crisis is acknowledged and defined. Many have already shown the interconnectedness of all ecological challenges through notions such as eco-justice.<sup>38</sup> They intend to show how the environmental challenges are closely related to social problems of injustice and inequity. Yet, some exhibit a tendency to describe the ecological crisis only through its environmental manifestations. In some cases, the notion of ecology and environment seem even to be interchangeable. Nevertheless, the disproportionate suffering of those people who are the most marginalized and impoverished must be considered as part of any discussion of ecology. Environmental concerns should not overshadow other challenges such as hunger, poverty, overcrowding,

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<sup>37</sup> See Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 202. See also “Religion, Environmentalism, and the Meaning of Ecology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 446–64.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Dieter T. Hessel, *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2003), and William E. Gibson, ed., *Eco-Justice: The Unfinished Journey* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2004).

overconsumption, forced migration, and lifestyle integrity, which are also part of the current ecological crisis.<sup>39</sup> While human flourishing should not be disconnected from the life and welfare of other creatures, caring for the earth should not entail that human beings are ignored or forgotten. The notion of environment is certainly related to the notion of ecology, but it does not exhaust its meaning.

The third conclusion is related to the previous one. The way in which the ecological crisis is depicted and defined, determines the way in which theology can play a part in effectively responding to it. Ecotheology should not be reduced to environmental ethics. The latter will continue to be a specific area of ethics, a field of interest of a specific group of scholars and activists. Nevertheless, ecotheology is wider than this and it requires a whole reinvestigation of Christian doctrine.<sup>40</sup> The way in which the ecological crisis is theologically understood influences unavoidably not only the identification of its causes and manifestations, but also the formulation of what has to be done in order to counteract it. In this sense, the ecological crisis is the occasion so to speak for a Christian questioning of beliefs and practices that have fostered this crisis, and it is also the occasion for an ecological reform of Christianity. Just as South American liberation theology has been able to deepen the religious image of God, starting from the social and economic challenges of that part of the continent, ecological sensitivity likewise may help theology to continue unveiling the true visage of God. Ecotheology has to depict not only the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation, but it also

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<sup>39</sup> See Celia Deane-Drummond and Lisa Sideris, "Ecology: A Dialogue," in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon, and Kevin O'Brien (New York: Routledge, 2010), 68–69. The connection between social and environmental challenges is also strongly highlighted by *Laudato Si'*.

<sup>40</sup> Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 2.

has to question the Scriptures, theology, and tradition, in order to unfold and deepen an ecologically appropriate image of God. This image of God – the incomprehensible mystery – is not made of the projection of human concerns, but it is rather the outcome of the unfolding process of what has already been given to humanity by revelation.

As a hermeneutical science, theology is devoted to rendering intelligible Christian notions and images to its believers. It must envisage its role in the wake of God's self-communication to creation. In this sense, theology aims to express Christian revelation through meaningful and comprehensible categories so as to help to its salvific efficacy and its character of good news. It is meant to inspire and nurture the life of believers through its exposition of the Christian faith, and this is why it must unfold in a significant and understandable language. Nevertheless, theology is concerned not only about orthodoxy; it also aims for orthopraxis. In this sense, theology helps to shape people's imagination and the way believers portray and make practical sense of the principal notions and images of Christianity. Therefore the task of theology can be defined in terms of an unceasing answering of the following question: How do Christian notions and images help people not only to penetrate the divine mystery which embraces reality, but also to live their lives toward real fulfilment? Theology's character and purpose are mainly *mystagogical*. Belief and practice are not to be dissociated. They constantly intertwine and shape one another. Always contextually rooted, theology serves and nourishes this interaction between creed and deed.

Theology must respond to the ecological crisis and inspire the imaginations of people who are searching for concrete ways to respond and new ways of living. Retrieving some biblical and historical perspectives, along with the deepening of other standpoints currently

available, ecotheology should contribute to the ecological reformation of Christianity.<sup>41</sup> In the interplay between people's lives and beliefs, the current crisis which seems to threaten life's viability, and the sources of Christianity, ecotheology must offer a meaningful and helpful understanding especially of humanity, one which would shake up people's imagination and would help them to discern pathways to true life.

The fourth conclusion is that ecology must be understood to have at least three dimensions: personal, social, and environmental. The notion of ecology is not only wider than the notion of environment, but it also rather entails a personal and a social component. While the scientific understanding of ecology reduces it to a sub-discipline of biology, its philosophical and more comprehensive definition allows for a systemic approach which displays its personal, social, and environmental dimensions together. In this sense, the term ecology can be interpreted as consisting of an integrated whole progressively based upon personal, social, and environmental ecologies.<sup>42</sup> In using those terms I do not intend to retrieve the notions of human ecology or social ecology as they have been proposed and developed by some scholars and activists over the last century.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, I aim to emphasize a more general and basic fact. If ecology refers to interaction and interrelatedness, then it has to take into account all human dimensions of relationality, without confining itself just to the human-nature

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<sup>41</sup> See James A. Nash, "Christianity's Ecological Reformation," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 372–75.

<sup>42</sup> See Edward T. Wimberley, *Nested Ecology: The Place of Humans in the Ecological Hierarchy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 4. In addition to personal, social, and environmental ecologies, the author develops what he calls *cosmic ecology*. The latter depicts the planet Earth within a cosmic ecosystem that sustains it and largely dictates the conditions under which life on the planet will exist. It also inquires incipiently what influence human activity has made upon the solar system.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Amos H. Hawley, *Human Ecology. A Theoretical Essay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), and *Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1950); John Clark, "Social Ecology," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 1569–71, and Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom. The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, California: Cheshire Books, 1982), 16–42.

relationship. Therefore, “personal” and “social” as well as “environmental” are dimensions that necessarily pertain to an ecological analysis of human existence. If ecology relates to the way humanity both thinks of and embodies its inhabitance on the earth, it has to do therefore with the person in its social and environmental interactions. In a certain sense, all human life and experience is an ecological event.<sup>44</sup>

I do not intend to technically define and delimit three types of ecology: personal, social, and environmental. I rather believe that the notion of ecology is often equated with the notion of environment, to the extent that they seem to be interchangeable, and that it is important to oppose this reduction by acknowledging and examining the personal and social dimensions of ecology. The personal dimension of ecology refers to the domain of personal interactions of each individual. It encompasses the whole array of sustainable and healthy dynamics and ways of living, which nurture the flourishing and fulfillment of human beings. Personal ecology therefore focuses on the primal interaction of every individual with him/herself, and the social and environmental consequences that this interaction implies. This is not to concur with a management-oriented definition of personal ecology, which would highlight personal balance as the guiding goal. From a theological standpoint, personal ecology aims toward personal flourishing and fulfillment. Some topics that pertain to the personal dimension of ecology are the way people think of and organize their everyday life, pace of life, working and leisure time, consumption habits and the discernment of what is necessary for maintenance, the use of space and housing, the choice of means of transportation, and the way people relate to their own bodies. Personal ecology hence focuses on the basic subjectification process of every

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<sup>44</sup> Wimberley, *Nested Ecology*, 13.

individual and the consequences that that entails for his or her interaction with others and the environment.

The notion of social ecology has been proposed and developed specially by the American author and activist Murray Bookchin, as an attempt to show the intimate connection and dependence between environmental challenges and social problems.<sup>45</sup> In doing so he aims to provide an intellectual tool which would help in criticizing all hierarchical structures within societies and all forms of domination between humans – such as gender, ethnic, and class domination – which would lie at the heart of the domination of nature by humanity. Opposing these forms of domination and hierarchies, which are the social sources of the ecological crisis, requires collective action and major social movements and not just individual changes within forms of consumption and lifestyle. In this sense, “social ecology is an appeal not only for moral regeneration but also, and above all, for social reconstruction along ecological lines.”<sup>46</sup>

In using the notion of social ecology, I do not intend simply to retrieve the work of Bookchin or to blindly subscribe to his own approach. By pointing to the social dimension of ecology, I want to highlight first of all that if ecology has to do with the interaction and interrelations among beings, it necessarily contains a social dimension. The way in which this social interaction is conceived of, organized, and embodied by individuals certainly pertains to

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<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, “what literally defines social ecology as ‘social’ is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Conversely, present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today – apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes” or “Social ecology refuses to ignore the fact that the harm elitist society inflicted on the natural world was more than matched by the harm it inflicted on humanity; nor does it overlook the fact that the destiny of human life goes hand-in-hand with the destiny of the nonhuman world,” Bookchin, “What Is Social Ecology?,” 462 and 472-3 respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 475.

any ecological analysis of human existence. Secondly, the social interaction between human beings affects and influences the nature-humanity relationship. Many have asserted that the exploitative practices vis-à-vis nature, are just an extension or expression of pattern of domination among humans. This has been especially underscored by some feminist theologians through what has been labeled ecofeminism.<sup>47</sup> The basic claim is that the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are mutually interlocked. Finally, and from a different angle, it is also true that environmental conditions and challenges not only influence but in a certain way shape as well the social interaction between individuals. It is also manifest that environmental challenges and disasters have a direct impact on how social interaction is embodied and social structures are established. Some have underlined that environmental problems and their consequences often touch the poorest among the poor. Hence, tackling environmental challenges implies addressing social problems as well. Likewise, dealing with social inequalities and injustices requires taking into account environmental challenges.<sup>48</sup> This is just what Catholic social teaching has consistently expressed through the idea that there will be no real peace within humanity, without being at peace with creation.<sup>49</sup>

In pointing to the social dimension of ecology I want to emphasize therefore, on the one hand, the social dimension of human interaction which determines and is constitutive of individual identities. On the other hand, I want to assert the intimate connection between social interaction and social structures, and the environment. Several topics can epitomize the

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<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), and Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (London-New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Benedict XVI, "Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace 2010: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation," January 1, 2010, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html).

social dimension of ecology, such as forced migration for environmental causes, world hunger and the production and distribution of food, production and access to drinking water, energy generation and use, and security and health in relation to dangerous diseases. As these examples make manifest, it is a false dilemma to think that we need to choose between prioritizing environmental challenges or social inequality and injustices. Dealing with the former necessarily entails dealing with the latter.

The environmental dimension of ecology is by far the most acknowledged and studied, to the extent that, as I mentioned above, the notions of ecology and environment tend to be mistakenly merged. If ecology refers to the way people think of and imagine their mode of inhabitance on the earth, it necessarily has to do with the nature-humanity relationship. The environmental dimension of ecology, on the one hand, points to the manner in which humanity conceives of its presence and role within creation, and on the other hand, draws the moral and practical consequences of the human dependence on and relatedness with all other creatures. In this sense, environmental ecology focuses therefore on the interaction between humanity and all the rest of both living and nonliving beings.

The environmental dimension of ecology refers to the manner in which the nature-humanity relationship is not only lived, but also to the presuppositions that govern it, the dynamics that constitute it, and its practical consequences for both nature and humanity. All these factors – presuppositions, dynamics, and consequences – are inevitably determined by cultural and historical contexts.<sup>50</sup> Human life has always involved an impact upon the environments in which it has unfolded. There is no such a thing as zero impact. Yet, this

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<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

influence is certainly related to what humans think of their role within creation, the means involved in this interaction (e.g. technics and science), and the general goals that they pursue. In this sense, modern societies have increased their impact upon the earth to the extent that, for the first time in history, human power threatens the very existence of life and seems able to alter greatly the conditions and forms of life which we know. The first warnings have been raised by scientists who have denounced a destructive way of living characterized by a) depletion of resources, especially those which are not renewable; b) diminishing ecosystems and biodiversity; (c) varied forms of increasing pollution which affect the natural balance; and (d) a permanent risk of technological or military disasters associated mostly with nuclear energy.<sup>51</sup> The modern human impact upon the earth is certainly growing, cumulative, and lasting.

The environmental dimension of ecology encompasses a large variety of topics such as pollution, endangered species, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, waste and depletion of resources, and climate change. Despite the current environmental challenges that humanity faces, environmental ecology should not be reduced to a problem-oriented approach to the human-nature relationship. From a theological point of view, it has as its chief guiding goal the flourishing and fulfillment of the entire creation.

In sum, the way in which the ecological crisis is understood and depicted, determines the way in which theology can play a role in dealing with it. Even though based upon the scientific approach to reality, the notion of ecology should not be reduced to its scientific

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<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, the pioneering work of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Anniversary edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), the book was originally published in 1962, and Donella H Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

definition. Neither should it be merged or identified with the notion of environment. Understood in a broader sense, the notion of ecology points to the manner in which humans not only conceive of but also embody their way of inhabiting the world. In this sense, ecology must be understood through three interwoven dimensions which mutually affect each other, namely, personal, social, and environmental. These dimensions of ecology should not be seen as watertight compartments, but rather as concentric circles that mutually interact and shape the way in which humanity both portrays and lives its existence upon the earth. Ecological crisis means, therefore, that we are living a critical moment in which our lifestyle and the values that sustain it are being judged and called into question for their destructive results. It is a crisis inasmuch as we are confronted with the current and future life-threatening scenarios, which can be drawn as unavoidable consequences of human practices and beliefs, and humanity needs therefore to make a decision about it. In doing so, we need not only practical criteria but also inspiring and sound images about human life upon the earth that may enlighten our discernment of pathways to true and fruitful life. Theology and Christian communities can play a crucial role in this awareness and transformation of minds and practices because they carry the archetypes, symbols, meaning, values, and moral codes around which people coalesce and define themselves.<sup>52</sup>

### **3. Manifestations of the ecological crisis**

Given this understanding of the ecological crisis, one can ask about the signs and manifestations of it. What are the challenges and problems that characterize the current

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<sup>52</sup> Conradie, "Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology," 286.

ecological crisis? What are the symptoms and facts that call for a revision of the way humanity is thinking of and embodying its life upon the earth? Where are the traces and marks that have raised warnings about human behavior detrimental to life to the extent of threatening not only the quality and flourishing of the latter, but even its viability? As is mentioned above, the facts and data that are provided as a manifestation of the ecological crisis depend on the notion of ecology that one is actually using. The bibliography that charts the ecological crisis is abundant and diverse, and it ranges from scientific analysis of some data and indicators about specific topics such as biodiversity loss, population growth, climate change, and pollution, to more philosophical and theological investigations of the causes and roots of this crisis. Without any effort to be exhaustive, I aim to present four manifestations of the current ecological crisis that not only illustrate the gravity and urgency of the challenges humanity is dealing with, but also exhibit clearly the interconnection and mutual dependence among the three dimensions of ecology: personal, social, and environmental. These four manifestations are: hunger, migration for environmental causes, water, and waste.

*a. Hunger*

World hunger is certainly one of the most scandalous manifestations of the current ecological crisis. It shows at once both the human face of the crisis, and how the three dimensions of ecology are deeply interwoven. According to the latest report of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations regarding the state of food insecurity in the world, about 795 million people are estimated to be chronically undernourished in the

world.<sup>53</sup> Even though this indicates a reduction in global hunger of 100 million people over the last decade, and a decrease in the prevalence of undernourishment from 18.7 to 11.3 percent globally during the same time, it is outrageous that roughly one in every nine people in the world still has insufficient food for an active and healthy life. Within developing countries, where the vast majority of hungry people live, this proportion goes up to about one in every eight people, and the prevalence of undernourishment increases to 13.5 percent. Steven Bouma-Prediger offers the provocative image that if the hungry people in the world today were lined up shoulder to shoulder, the line of those who have too little to eat to meet their daily energy needs would extend around the world thirteen times.<sup>54</sup> Both, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving by 2015 the *proportion* of undernourished people within developing countries seems to be at reach, and the World Food Summit (WFS) goal of halving the *number* of undernourished people by the same were not totally reached. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are lagging behind in the path of attaining these goals. While the former has the highest prevalence of undernourishment – around one in every four people in the region remains undernourished – the latter concentrates the highest number of undernourished people in the world.

Food insecurity is manifestly a complex phenomenon that results from multiple causes.<sup>55</sup> It is also difficult to measure. The World Food Summit of 1996 established four

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<sup>53</sup> FAO, IFAD and WFP, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015. Meeting the 2015 International Hunger Targets: Taking Stocks of Uneven Progress* (Rome: FAO, 2015), 8.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed., Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 27.

<sup>55</sup> The FAO defines **Food Insecurity** as follows: A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level. Food insecurity, poor conditions of health and sanitation and inappropriate care and

dimensions of food security: availability, access, stability, and utilization, and the 2013 FAO report on the state of food insecurity in the world introduced a suite of new indicators for pinning down not only the figures of undernourishment in the world, but also its causes and the factors that increase the risk of perpetuating or even heightening this challenge. Many actions are required in a large variety of fields in order to counteract global undernourishment. As the FAO report states, depending on the context and the specific situation, actions may be required in agricultural production and productivity, rural development, fisheries, forestry, social protection, public works, trade and markets, resilience to shocks, education and health, and other areas.<sup>56</sup> From the analysis of the experience of different countries it is manifest that hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition are complex problems with multifaceted causes.

Global environmental changes (GEC) unavoidably affect the food system. These changes in the physical and biogeochemical environment are caused naturally or influenced by human activities such as deforestation, fossil fuel consumption, urbanization, land reclamation, agricultural intensification, freshwater extraction, fisheries over-exploitation, and waste production. The notion of GEC includes changes in land cover and soils, biogeochemical cycles and atmospheric composition, biodiversity, climate and extreme weather events, sea level, and ocean chemistry and currents, and freshwater quality and availability.<sup>57</sup> In future scenarios,

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feeding practices are the major causes of poor nutritional status. Food insecurity may be chronic, seasonal or transitory. **Food security:** A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Based on this definition, four food security dimensions can be identified: food availability, economic and physical access to food, food utilization and stability over time. FAO, IFAD and WFP, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2014. Strengthening the Enabling Environment for Food Security and Nutrition* (Rome: FAO, 2014), 50.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>57</sup> John Ingram, Polly Erickson, and Diana Liverman, eds., *Food Security and Global Environmental Change* (London-Washington: Routledge, 2010), 8.

climate change is acknowledged to be one of the main factors that heighten food insecurity. It will affect all the main elements of food production, namely, land, water, and climate. Even though predictions about how climate change will affect our food supply are complex and debatable, it can be said that, in the near future, global warming will increase world hunger. For some of the world's staple crops, such as maize and rice, are very susceptible to rising temperatures and to more unpredictably extreme seasons. Almost without exception, the countries with existing problems in feeding their people are those most at risk from climate change.<sup>58</sup> Research shows that as soon as 2020 food production will be already affected by the mounting of temperatures, shifting seasons, more frequent and extreme weather events, flooding, and drought. As a result, there will be supposedly by that time a shortage of the four major food crops, namely, rice, wheat, maize, and soybean.<sup>59</sup> There will also be consequences for fisheries and livestock. One of the paradoxes is that the food system is a notable producer of greenhouse gases through agricultural and non-agricultural activities.<sup>60</sup> These emissions have been growing, especially as diets have been switching to meat and dairy products. In this sense, the current food system is one of the causes of global warming and therefore climate change, which will affect in turn the food system with disastrous consequences.

The amount of food produced nowadays is enough to feed the current world's population. However, due to poor distribution of food, around 14 percent of the world's population is still undernourished. Global food security is not only about producing enough

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<sup>58</sup> Oxfam, *Suffering the Science. Climate Change, People and Poverty* (London: Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2009), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Liliana Hisas, *The Food Gap. The Impacts of Climate Change of Food Production: A 2020 Perspective* (Alexandria, VA: Universal Ecological Fund, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> The food system produces carbon dioxide (25 per cent of all emissions if agriculture's role in causing deforestation is included), methane from rice and livestock (50 per cent of all emissions) and nitrogen dioxide from fertilizer (75 per cent of the global total), Ingram, Erickson, and Liverman, *Food Security and Global Environmental Change*, 17.

food for the world's population. Inequalities and complexities of food distribution mean that while more than 800 million people are currently malnourished, 1 billion are overweight and susceptible to diseases associated with obesity.<sup>61</sup> There is also the problem of "hidden hunger." Another billion people are thought to suffer from "hidden hunger," in which important micronutrients, such as vitamins and minerals, are missing from their diet, with consequent risks of physical and mental impairment.<sup>62</sup> Against this background of undernourishment and hunger, it is also scandalous that roughly 30 to 40% of food in both the developed and developing worlds is lost to waste. While in the latter the causes are mainly attributable to the absence of food-chain infrastructure and the lack of knowledge or investment in storage technologies on the farm, in the former pre-retail losses are much lower, but those arising at the retail, food service, and home stages of the food chain have grown dramatically in recent years, for a variety of reasons such as low food prices which reduces incentives to avoid waste, and the higher cosmetic standards of consumption that make sellers discard many edible, yet only slightly blemished products.<sup>63</sup>

The challenge that hunger and undernourishment represent for humanity, shows the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of ecology. The global challenge of food security calls into question not only our relationship with nature throughout the entire food system, but also our personal patterns of consumption and solidarity with our neighbors. World hunger and undernourishment will not be successfully tackled just by the employment of new and more

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<sup>61</sup> See The Royal Society, *Reaping the Benefits: Science and the Sustainable Intensification of Global Agriculture* (London: The Royal Society, 2009), 5.

<sup>62</sup> See The Government Office for Science, *Foresight. The Future of Food and Faming 2011. Final Project Report* (London: Government Office for Science, 2011), 9.

<sup>63</sup> See H. Charles J. Godfray et al., "Food Security: The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People," *Science* 327, no. 5967 (2010): 816.

suitable technology in food production and distribution. The use of certain means of production such as organisms genetically modified (GMO), the use of biotechnology, and intensive (confined/industrialized) grain-fed livestock systems raise in fact new challenges and ethical queries. We need to revise as well the ideas and criteria that both govern the way we relate to food consumption, and orient not only food production but also its equitable distribution.

Besides the fact that food insecurity prevails in the world's poorest regions, the consequences of climate change upon the food system will affect primarily those who are already poor and vulnerable. The theologian Joshtrom Kureethadam speaks of a double injustice, namely geographical and demographic.<sup>64</sup> While the first injustice refers to the fact that the negative influence of climate change on crop yields will be felt most in poor countries, the second points to the fact that food insecurity due to environmental changes will have particular impacts on specific groups like subsistence farmers, rural and indigenous communities, and fisher folk. Some of the most important effects of climate change will be felt indeed among the populations, predominantly in developing countries, referred to as subsistence or smallholder farmers.<sup>65</sup> This double injustice accentuates both the scandal of global food insecurity and the urgency of making options and exploring solutions that take into account the three dimensions – personal, social, and environmental – of this ecological challenge.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Joshtrom Kureethadam, *Creation in Crisis: Science, Ethics, Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 232.

<sup>65</sup> John F. Morton, "The Impact of Climate Change on Smallholder and Subsistence Agriculture," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 50 (2007): 19680.

<sup>66</sup> For an interesting theological reflection on food, see Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

### **b. Migration**

Environmental factors have certainly been the cause of migration in the past. It suffices to remember among many other cases, for instance, the Irish migration to USA following the 1840s potato famine. The environment has always influenced the distribution of human settlements across the world. For many people living in tough environments, migration is the chosen option to preserve their livelihoods. Nevertheless, as the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre states, two factors render both the present time and the foreseeable future different from the past. First, the global scale of environmental change and thus the potential impacts it will have, such as forced migration, are new phenomena. No longer will these impacts be episodic or localized. Second, human agency is unarguably at the center of environmental change and the potential to respond to it.<sup>67</sup> Migration as a consequence of environmental changes is already a fact, which is affecting livelihoods, communities, and the social and cultural identities of people. Yet, what are the concepts that better frame the situation and status of those who migrate for environmental causes? Should they be called ecological refugees or environmental migrants? How can their status be established and defined? How many people currently are and in the future will be displaced by environmental causes? In which areas is this more likely to happen? How can this be estimated? What are the responsibilities and duties of governments vis-à-vis those who flee their homes for environmental reasons? These are the main questions that have articulated the reflection on migration motivated by environmental causes. The tasks of

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<sup>67</sup> Camillo Boano, Roger Zetter, and Tim Morris, *Environmentally Displaced People: Understanding the Linkages between Environmental Change, Livelihoods and Forced Migration* (Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2008), 5.

defining the status, estimating the numbers and establishing the rights and duties of those who leave their households for environmental reasons, is an ongoing process.

The conceptualizing process is essential for research and policy-making. Nevertheless it is difficult to establish a clear-cut definition of what an environmental migrant would and would not be. The main obstacles to the lack of definition relating to migration caused by environmental degradation or change are, on the one hand, the difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration and, on the other hand, the confusion of forced versus voluntary migration.<sup>68</sup> How can the environmental reasons to migrate be evaluated when they are interwoven with other motivations and causes? How can their influence on the decision to migrate be established? Is environmental migration associated just with human displacement caused by sudden and unexpected natural disasters, or can it take the form of voluntary resettlements motivated by environmental changes? What about relocations ordered by governments as a result of specific projects of risks? When it comes to choose a notion to define the status of those who migrate for environmental causes, some prefer the term “environmental refugee” – despite the fact that it is legally inaccurate – because it is more compelling than the term “environmental migrant” and it evokes a sense of global duty and accountability along with a sense of urgency before imminent adversities.<sup>69</sup> Despite the problems of agreeing on a definition, notion, and typology for the people who abandon their homes for environmental causes, it is actually a fact that the current environmental challenges are provoking migration and human displacements.

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<sup>68</sup> Olivia Dun and François Gemenne, “Defining ‘Environmental Migration,’” *Forced Migration Review*, no. 31 (October 2008): 10.

<sup>69</sup> Maria Stavropoulou, “Drowned in Definitions?” *Forced Migration Review*, no. 31 (October 2008): 12.

Four main reasons are identified as causes for environmental migration.<sup>70</sup> The first type of migration is related to sudden environmental disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, droughts, water or soil pollution, etc. In this case, the link between human displacement and environmental causes is manifest. Moreover, there seems to be a consensus that the number of environmental disasters and their impact upon human migration is increasing. Oxfam, for instance, estimates that by 2015 the average number of people affected each year by climate-related disasters may increase by over 50 per cent compared to the decade 1998-2007, bringing the annual average to more than 375 million people.<sup>71</sup> This may certainly have an effect upon human displacement. The second type of migration has to do with gradual environmental degradation, such as desertification. In this case migration is motivated by a slow-onset environmental change or degradation which affects people who are directly dependent on the environment for their maintenance. It is certainly more difficult to isolate the environmental causes from other factors in this type of human displacement. Nevertheless, it is affirmed that overall, a much larger number of people is expected to migrate due to gradual deterioration of environmental conditions rather than natural disasters, even if, in most cases, their fate does not catch headlines.<sup>72</sup> This is why some state the importance of identifying and mapping potential environmental ‘hotspots’ and problem locations along with monitoring changing conditions and identifying tipping points that trigger migration rather than

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<sup>70</sup> Hugo Graeme, *Migration, Development, and Environment*, IOM Migration Research Series 35 (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008), 15–42.

<sup>71</sup> Oxfam, *The Right to Survive. The Humanitarian Challenge for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Oxfam International, 2009), 93.

<sup>72</sup> IOM, *Compendium of IOM’s Activities in Migration, Climate Change and the Environment* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2009), 18.

adaptation.<sup>73</sup> The third type of migration is associated with climate change, which is expected to affect the environment through the intensification of the occurrence and power of natural disasters, and the increasing of global temperature with disastrous consequences to agricultural production, water availability, and sea level. This may render uninhabitable some coastal areas and increase the number of sinking island states. It can also imply competition over natural resources which may lead to conflict and human displacement as one of its consequences.<sup>74</sup> Yet, even though we can intuitively believe that migration caused by climate change is likely to be serious in the future, it is hard to predict at present how serious it will be. The final type of environmental migration is due to construction of infrastructure development projects, such as dam construction. Graeme Hugo offers the example of the Three Gorges Dam project located in the lower reaches of Yangtze River in China, which has involved a displacement of more than 1.2 million people.<sup>75</sup> These four types of migration display the complexity and variety of human population distribution caused by environmental changes.

There is no consensus about the number of people who will have to migrate because of environmental changes. Norman Myers of Oxford University, for instance, states that, when global warming takes hold, there could be as many as 200 million people overtaken by disruptions of monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, by droughts of unprecedented severity and duration, and by sea-level rise and coastal flooding.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, this figure is highly dependent on how one portrays and envisages the changes within the environment

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<sup>73</sup> Boano, Zetter, and Morris, *Environmentally Displaced People: Understanding the Linkages between Environmental Change, Livelihoods and Forced Migration*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Frank Laczko and Olga Sheean, eds., *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2009), 15.

<sup>75</sup> Graeme, *Migration, Development, and Environment*, 41.

<sup>76</sup> Norman Myers, “Environmental Refugees: An Emergent Security Issue” (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, May 2005), 1.

driven by climate change. Moreover, it does not take into account the adaptation measures that individuals, communities, and governments may undertake.<sup>77</sup> Despite the fact that it is highly difficult to predict the number of people who will need to migrate for environmental causes, and that this affects the policy-making process and governments' reactions, it is beyond doubt that human displacement for environmental reasons is an increasing phenomenon.

It is manifest that environmental changes and degradation are pushing people to migrate. This reality is one of the manifestations of the current ecological crisis. It epitomizes the urgency of the problems as well as the interconnection between the personal, social, and environmental dimension of ecology. Although migration is not always negative, it is true that the effects of sudden mass migration are profoundly damaging. The links between environmental degradation, climate change, and human displacement are complex. This is why more research and data collection are needed, in order to foster suitable policies that can protect those who migrate for environmental reasons, particularly the most vulnerable.

### **c. Water**

It seems to be a constant truth that the meaning and importance of some things is not fully appreciated, inasmuch as they abound and are widely available. When they run into a shortage, are scarcely found, or regrettably disappear, then their essential character is finally grasped and acknowledged. One understands, for instance, the deep meaning of health when sick, and grasps the true significance of freedom when one is oppressed. In this sense, as the planet seems to move towards fresh water scarcity, this may be a momentous time to not only

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<sup>77</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2009. Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2009), 45.

affirm the importance of water, but also to protect its availability through sustainable practices for its extraction and use. Although we are totally dependent on water which is indeed a *sine qua non* need for life and its quality, this radical dependence is not always noticed when clear, fresh water is readily accessible. Yet, we are heading toward fresh water scarcity insofar as the increasing world demand for fresh water is surpassing in some regions its available supply, as well as exceeding the natural rates of hydrological renewal through the water cycle.

In order to visualize the challenge, it suffices to recall some statistics. The UN-Water office's document entitled *A post-2015 Global Goal for Water* states, for instance, that as countries develop and populations grow, the potential demand for water is projected to increase 55% by 2050. Already by 2025, two thirds of the world's population could be living in water-stressed countries if current consumption patterns continue.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the WHO and UNICEF 2014 joint report on progress on drinking water and sanitation affirms that despite strong overall progress, 748 million people – mostly the poor and marginalized – still did not have access to improved drinking water in 2012, 325 million (43%) of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>79</sup> We also know that water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century and that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity.<sup>80</sup> It is important to notice that fresh water represents less than 2.5 percent of all available water on earth. Of these fresh water resources about 70 percent is in the form of ice and permanent snow cover in mountainous regions, the Antarctic and Arctic regions; almost 30 percent is groundwater and mere 0.3 percent of all fresh

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<sup>78</sup> UN-Water, "A Post-2015 Global Goal for Water: Synthesis of Key Findings and Recommendations from UN-Water" (UN-Water, January 2014), 8, [http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/27\\_01\\_2014\\_un-water\\_paper\\_on\\_a\\_post2015\\_global\\_goal\\_for\\_water.pdf](http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/27_01_2014_un-water_paper_on_a_post2015_global_goal_for_water.pdf).

<sup>79</sup> UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation. 2014 Update* (Geneva: WHO Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>80</sup> See the UN-Water fact sheet on water scarcity: [www.unwater.org](http://www.unwater.org).

water is surface water.<sup>81</sup> Water supply crises have been identified by governments, scholars, industry, and civil actors as one of the most important global risks,<sup>82</sup> especially groundwater depletion.

The reasons for the increase in water withdrawal and consumption are complex. It is manifest that population growth along with urban and increasing standards of lifestyle leads to growing water demand, inasmuch as it raises the need for drinking water, health and sanitation, as well as for energy, food, and other goods and services that require water for their production and delivery. The global demand for water is expected to grow especially within developing or emerging economies. Nowadays, agriculture accounts for roughly 70% of total freshwater withdrawals globally, with the industrial and domestic sectors accounting for the remaining 20% and 10% respectively, although these figures vary considerably across countries.<sup>83</sup> While agriculture is responsible for the 70% of global water withdrawal, it uses 90% of the water it withdraws. This is a highly consumptive use of fresh water, which means that the water needed for agriculture is made unavailable for other purposes. In contrast, many domestic and some industrial uses of fresh water are nonconsumptive, which means that the water is reintegrated into the ecosystem or municipal water supply in some fashion, and therefore it is made available for other purposes.

Even though data on water use (withdrawals and consumption) and quality are very often outdated, limited or unavailable,<sup>84</sup> it is a fact that there is an increasing demand and use

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<sup>81</sup> See UN-Water, "Statistics," <http://www.unwater.org/statistics/>

<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, World Economic Forum, *Global Risks 2013. Eighth Edition* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> WWAP (United Nations World Water Assessment Programme), *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2014: Water and Energy* (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), 23.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

of fresh water which represents a tremendous challenge for the future. Climate change is also expected to alter hydrological regimes and the availability of fresh water, with impacts on both rainfed and irrigated agriculture.<sup>85</sup> It will reduce precipitation in areas that are already semi-arid, and increase precipitation in temperate zones as well as increase the frequency of extreme events. As the UN Water states it is through water and its quality that people will feel the impact of change most strongly. Without proper adaptation and change people will be at great risk of hunger, disease, energy shortages, and poverty due to water scarcity, pollution and flooding.<sup>86</sup> In this sense, water demand and consumption is intimately connected with other priority areas such as food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture, as well as health, biodiversity, desertification, land degradation, and drought. Therefore, the way through which we respond to the challenge of fresh water scarcity will certainly impact how we deal with other ecological challenges. Global development goals for food security, poverty reduction, energy, and other factors cannot be attained without dependable water provisions. Hence it can be said that a global goal for water would contribute to poverty eradication, gender equality, enjoyment of the human right to water and sanitation, and universal development while conserving the Earth's finite and vulnerable water resources for current and future generations.<sup>87</sup> No need to mention that although these ecological challenges affect our entire planet, they have a greater impact upon more vulnerable and poorer populations, such as women and children in rural areas.

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<sup>85</sup> FAO, *Coping with Water Scarcity. An Action Framework for Agriculture and Food Security*, FAO Water Reports 38 (Rome: FAO Publications, 2012), 13.

<sup>86</sup> WWAP (United Nations World Water Assessment Programme), *The United Nations World Water Development Report 4: Managing Water under Uncertainty and Risk* (Paris: UNESCO, 2012), 10–11.

<sup>87</sup> UN-Water, "A Post-2015 Global Goal for Water: Synthesis of Key Findings and Recommendations from UN-Water," 9.

Technology has certainly a role to play in facing fresh water scarcity, but it will not resolve all the challenges. It is true that technology can increase efficiency, decrease waste, and transform polluted water into usable water. It is also true that already in some countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar salt water is being turned into fresh water through desalination processes. All of this definitely, though minimally, contributes to a larger fresh water supply. Nevertheless, technology is not the panacea, and an excessive confidence in its benefits can prevent us from examining and revising other aspects of our relationship with water that may need to be amended. It is crucial, for instance, that we ask questions about who owns the water, who can earn money from it, who must pay for its distribution, and who guides and controls its management. It is vital as well to establish certain forms of accountability, and clear-cut standards in our use of fresh water. Fresh water scarcity is not just an environmental challenge. As an ecological challenge, it also involves personal and social dimensions that need equally to be addressed.

The American theologian Christiana Peppard emphasizes that we must keep in mind two key observations or paradoxes in dealing with the problem of fresh water scarcity.<sup>88</sup> First, while twenty-first-century fresh water crises are felt most acutely at a domestic level, fresh water scarcity cannot be solved solely by reducing domestic demand. Besides the fact that its destiny is intimately related to agriculture, fresh water scarcity requires the cooperation of all toward sustainable solutions. Second, while the need for fresh water is universal, there is no such thing as a universal solution to fresh water scarcity. We need therefore to explore local and

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<sup>88</sup> Christiana Z. Peppard, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 35. Another theological source dealing with the ecological challenges related to water is Sean McDonagh, *Dying for Water* (Dublin, Ireland: Veritas Publications, 2003).

contextual solutions. This is why some prefer to speak of water crises in the plural, for it always emerges in particular contexts. These two paradoxes about fresh water scarcity may guide our search for solutions as well as direct our reflection not only toward the environment, but also toward the personal and social components of this ecological challenge.

#### ***d. Waste***

Waste treatment and management is becoming a major challenge nowadays. Yet, waste is neither only a byproduct of modern societies nor a new phenomenon. Humanity has always needed to deal with substances or objects resulting from human activities that are unable to be reused and therefore are meant to be disposed. What is new is that the treatment and management of global waste is facing three main challenges: 1) Increasing growth in the quantity and complexity of waste streams associated with rising incomes and economic growth, 2) Increasing risk of damage to human health and ecosystems, and 3) its contribution to climate change.<sup>89</sup> Waste is generated in many different ways, and each waste product needs a particular management solution. Waste composition and size depend mainly on consumption patterns and the industrial and economic structures in place. It can be classified according to its constitution, namely, municipal solid waste, hazardous waste, and nuclear (radioactive) waste, or it can be related to a particular stage of the production process which produces a specific type of waste. In this last case, waste is divided into three main groups, namely, waste generated as a result of extraction and transformation of raw materials, manufacturing and

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<sup>89</sup> UNEP, "Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable and Poverty Eradication" (UNEP, 2011), 296, [www.unep.org/greenconomy](http://www.unep.org/greenconomy).

production of goods (including building construction), and distribution and consumption of manufactured products.<sup>90</sup>

Regardless of its composition, the amount of global waste is steadily growing. Based on official numbers, Steven Bouma-Prediger offers the images that each year the United States generates enough municipal solid waste to fill a bumper-to-bumper convoy of garbage trucks that would extend around the planet 3.8 times, and that a typical U.S. citizen throws away 62 tons of garbage over a 75-year lifetime.<sup>91</sup> This is speaking of just one country and of only municipal solid waste. The increase in waste generation is not just a management issue. It is rather a symptom of inadequate global methods for production and consumption. There is a direct link between affluence and waste generation. Research shows, for instance, that in high-income countries, an urban population of 0.3 billion generates approximately 0.24 million tonnes of Municipal Solid Waste (0.8 kg per capita per day), while in low-income countries around the same amount of waste (0.26 million tonnes per day) is generated by 1.3 billion people (0.2 kg per capita per day), a quarter of the level in high-income countries.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, the ecological challenge that waste represents for humanity is not just a matter of quantity. Other types of waste such as hazardous and nuclear waste entail enormous risks not only for human health but also for the integrity and life of ecosystems. This kind of waste poses a major concern inasmuch as it can have a tremendous environmental impact related basically to toxic contamination of soil, water, and air. Hazardous waste can be the outcome of different industrial or manufacturing processes or simply discarded commercial products, such as

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<sup>90</sup> UNEP, "Vital Waste Graphics 1" (UNEP, 2004), 10, <http://www.grida.no/publications/vg/waste>.

<sup>91</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 39.

<sup>92</sup> UNEP, "Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable and Poverty Eradication," 299.

cleaning fluids or pesticides. It is defined by its ignitability, corrosivity, reactivity, and toxicity. It can be liquid or solid, and each product requires a specific treatment. Hazardous waste is currently a risk not only for the zones where it is generated, but also to other places and regions inasmuch as it is transported from and exported to different countries. According to the Basel Convention, which regulates the transboundary movements of hazardous wastes, of more than 300 million tons of waste generated worldwide in 2000, a little less than 2% was exported. However 90% of the exported waste was classified as hazardous.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, besides the risks that this kind of waste involves for human health and environmental integrity, it raises also the question about justice and disparity among countries.

Among all types of waste, what is especially shocking is the amount of food that is lost and wasted worldwide. The FAO estimates, for instance, that 32 percent of all food produced in the world was lost or wasted in 2009. This figure is based on weight, and when it is converted into calories means that global food loss and waste amount to approximately 24 percent of all food produced.<sup>94</sup> Food is lost or wasted throughout the whole supply chain. In low-income societies food is mainly lost over the early and middle stages of the food supply chain for different reasons such as poor storage facilities and lack of infrastructure, poor and unhygienic handling which turns food unsafe for human consumption, and inadequate market systems. In medium and high-income societies, on the other hand, food is mainly lost or wasted at the consumption stage. This is due to reasons such as overproduction and abundance of food, standards and patterns of consumption, and food size and appearance. Here again there is a

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<sup>93</sup> UNEP, "Vital Waste Graphics 1," 29.

<sup>94</sup> Brian Lipinski et al., "Reducing Food Loss and Waste. Wording Paper. Installment 2 of 'Creating a Sustainable Food Future'" (World Resources Institute, 2013), 1, [http://www.unep.org/pdf/WRI-UNEP\\_Reducing\\_Food\\_Loss\\_and\\_Waste.pdf](http://www.unep.org/pdf/WRI-UNEP_Reducing_Food_Loss_and_Waste.pdf).

close connection between affluence and the waste of food. Indeed, overall, on a per-capita basis, much more food is wasted in the industrialized world than in developing countries. The FAO estimates that the per capita food waste by consumers in Europe and North-America is 95-115 kg/year, while this figure in sub-Saharan Africa and South/Southeast Asia is only 6-11 kg/year.<sup>95</sup> Major supermarkets, in adjusting to consumer expectations, can reject entire crops of perfectly edible fruit and vegetables at the farm because they do not have the form or appearance which matches marketing standards. Food is also wasted in industrialized countries because of its confusing labeling using the terms “use-by,” “best-before,” “sell-by,” or “display until.” These misunderstandings mean that people throw away a lot of food that is still good to eat, thinking that it might be liable to poison them.<sup>96</sup> This becomes more scandalous when we consider the figure that food waste at the consumer level in industrialized countries (222 million tons) is almost as high as the total net food production in sub-Saharan Africa (230 million tons).<sup>97</sup> Besides the issues of justice that this situation creates within a world with still nearly 1 billion undernourished people, it is also true that this wastage of food implies that a huge amount of resources used in food production are used in vain, and that some of the greenhouse gas emissions caused by production of food are also emissions in vain.

It is manifest that the challenge that waste management and treatment represents for humanity cannot be solved just by reducing, reusing, and recycling. It is not merely a technical problem which requires only technical solutions. We need to examine as well the personal and social components of this ecological problem, which are expressed for instance in cultural

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<sup>95</sup> FAO, *Global Food Losses and Waste: Extent, Causes and Prevention* (Rome: FAO Publications, 2011), v.

<sup>96</sup> Tristram Stuart, *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 60–67.

<sup>97</sup> FAO, *Global Food Losses and Waste: Extent, Causes and Prevention*, 5.

assumptions, patterns of consumption, and lifestyle standards. One example that epitomizes this is the notion of “planned obsolescence” and the increasing of electronic waste (e-waste). Research shows that e-waste recycling involves the major producers and users, shipping the obsolete products to Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Yet, in doing so we are exporting a sack full of problems to people who will have to deal eventually with this type of waste.<sup>98</sup> It is difficult to minimize the amount of waste when the durability of products is deliberately sacrificed for the sake of production gains, or we are permanently encouraged to replace some electronic devices still useful by their new formats or updated versions. We are in a throw-away culture which needs to revise some of its assumptions and values.<sup>99</sup> Focusing solely on the environmental issues that the treatment and management of waste involves, and neglecting the personal and social dimensions that underlie this ecological challenge, will entail a misunderstanding of its causes as well as errors in defining its solutions.

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<sup>98</sup> UNEP, “Vital Waste Graphics 1,” 35.

<sup>99</sup> This is something strongly highlighted by *Laudato Si’*. See Francis, “Laudato Si’. On Care for Our Common Home,” nos. 16, 22, 43, 123.

## **B) Models for an Ecological Christian Theology: towards an Ecotheological Rationale**

In choosing these four manifestations of the current ecological crisis, namely, hunger, migration, water, and waste, I aim to show the gravity and urgency of the challenges which humanity is facing as well as the intimate connection between the three dimensions of ecology: personal, social, and environmental. These four manifestations of the ecological crisis, among many others, reveal the human responsibility not only in the generation of these problems but also in their potential solutions. The anthropogenic character of this crisis is undeniable. The fact that humanity already enjoys a leading position within creation has to be the starting point for theological reflection. This fact, which goes beyond the debate about the degree of anthropocentrism in Christian narratives, is the expression of a new era in which the dichotomies between natural processes and culture, on the one hand, and natural processes and history, on the other hand, seem to be neither valid nor useful.<sup>100</sup> Against this background, theology needs to provide images and notions that may shake up people's minds, and may inspire and nourish the way people think of their relationship with others and with nature. These notions and images may also guide people's searching and discernment of paths to a true and fruitful life. The ecological crisis has to do not only with environmental challenges such as

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<sup>100</sup> Some are strongly inclined to name this era as Anthropocene. See, for instance, the website of the International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA) which presents the outcome of the 34<sup>th</sup> International Geological Congress, held in Brisbane, Australia, 2013: "The 'Anthropocene' has emerged as a popular scientific term used by scientists, the scientifically engaged public and the media to designate the period of Earth's history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system. It is widely agreed that the Earth is currently in this state." <http://www.inqua-saccom.org/major-divisions/anthropocene/> or for a philosophical analysis of the notion of Anthropocene, see Bruno Latour, 2013 Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh: *Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature*, available online and on PDF: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour> see especially lecture 4: The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe.

diminishing ecosystems and biodiversity, but also and especially with the manner in which people depict and embody their life and role within creation.

In this sense, after tracing the appearance of ecotheology, its development and goals, as well as the meaning of the ecological crisis and its manifestations, it is worth asking about the rationale which underlies this theological endeavor. What are the strategies that ecotheology has explored in order to connect ecological sensitivity and theological reflection? If it is not just a matter of minor adjustments, then how does ecotheology justify the revisions, transformations, and deepening within Christian thought which the manifestations of the ecological crisis seem to require? Why and how has ecotheology been shaping a Christian critique of the cultural habits underlying ecological destruction, as well as an ecological reform of Christianity? What is the specific theological rationale which those stances exhibit? I move now therefore to ecotheology and its different expressions. Without any claim of being exhaustive, I present some strategies of how ecotheology has been connecting ecological challenges with theological reflection. Each one of these strategies has its own starting points, presuppositions, rationale, blind spots, and downsides. Given that the focus of this dissertation is theological anthropology, I will pay especially attention to the anthropological assumptions and implications of these theological stances.

### **1. Mapping the field: some typologies of ecotheology**

Mapping ecotheology is not an easy task. It has taken different forms and expressions over the last five decades. The differences are related to cultural and geographical contexts, the use of the Scriptures, types of questions that are addressed, particular or general concerns,

Christian denominations, the use of and dialogue with an array of scientific and philosophical resources such as biology, astrophysics, and cosmology, intellectual horizons, and goals, and the general assessment of Christian tradition. As a result of this, ecotheology is currently characterized by a number of different discourses, each one with its own interlocutors, guilds, and forms of rhetoric. South African theologian Ernst Conradie, for instance, identifies and names some of the current discourses within ecotheology including: explorations in exegesis such us the Earth Bible project and the Exeter project; discourses in the field of applied ethics in topics like animal issues, food issues, biotechnology, or climate change; various regional modes of ecofeminism; interfaith projects in religion and ecology like the one within the Forum on Religion and Ecology which incorporate indigenous worldviews; efforts in the renovation of liturgy and spirituality through an ecological perspective; the Christian Faith and the Earth project on Christian symbols, doctrines and loci; and efforts toward the greening of institutions and communities.<sup>101</sup> These differences in themes, methods and priorities imply tensions as well as dissimilarities in the quality and scope of publications and research within ecotheology.

For some it is time to move beyond ecotheology inasmuch as it has been already successful in naming the significance of theological engagement with ecology, and the risk of self-marginalization needs to be avoided. In this perspective, ecotheology does not have a particular theological methodology or group of methodologies which have enduring significance, but it has rather accomplished the task of raising theological awareness of ecological challenges which call for a Christian critique of the practices and beliefs underlying

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<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, “The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology”; and “Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology: Some Reflections on the State of the Debate after Five Decades,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 147 (November 1, 2013): 106–23.

this crisis as well as for an ecological reformation of Christianity. To move beyond ecotheology does not mean to abandon theological attention towards ecological concerns. It rather suggests that any current theological project that fails to attend to ecological questions where relevant fails to be adequate theology as such.<sup>102</sup>

Assuming the internal differences in ecotheology some theologians have tried to map the field providing typologies which unveil the main strategies and rationale that scholars exhibit in linking theology with the current ecological crisis. The main goal of this mapping is not to offer a firm and definite map, but rather to group and expose different emphases, centers of gravity, methods, and perspectives, through which ecotheology is being unfolded. As I already mentioned, without any claim of being exhaustive, I will focus on the typologies offered by John Haught, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Willis Jenkins.

#### **a. John Haught**

The American theologian John Haught has developed a tripartite typology in order to classify the diversity of theological stances within ecotheology.<sup>103</sup> A renovated effort in ecotheology must take into account all of these three perspectives, which are complementary and not mutually exclusive. In this sense, each of these strategies is neither suppressed nor superseded by the other two. Each of them displays a particular accent and rationale which entails specific outcomes as well. According to Haught, none of these perspectives can be found

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<sup>102</sup> David Clough, "Beyond Ecotheology," *Theology* 116, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 47–49.

<sup>103</sup> See, John Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Second Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 153–172; *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, ed. David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 226–245; "Theology and the Environmental Crisis," in *Minding the Time 1492-1992. Jesuit Education and Issues in American Culture*, ed. William O'Brien (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 37–58; and *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

in a perfectly pure form, and aspects of all three maybe found in the work of any single author. However, they differ in method and conclusions, and therefore it is suitable to treat them as distinct types. The three theological perspectives are apologetic, sacramental and eschatological.

The first way of theologically addressing the ecological challenges is the apologetic perspective, which Haught also labels as tradition-centered approach. This is the stance which the majority of theologians have embraced. It tries to show that there is already a sufficient basis in Scripture and tradition for an adequately Christian response to the ecological crisis. Responding to the accusation that Christianity is at the root of the ecological challenges humanity is currently facing, the apologetic enterprise defends the integrity of biblical religion and traditional theology without demanding their transformation. What theology needs to do instead is to delve deeper into the Scriptures and tradition in order to dig up all ecologically friendly elements which have been ignored or forgotten. In this sense, this perspective emphasizes the idea of retrieving what revelation offers through the Bible and tradition in order to ground an ecologically sensitive theology.

This is the strategy assumed by many scholars and church authorities in the case of Catholicism. Haught thinks that the apologetic approach underlines the idea that God has given humanity dominion and stewardship over creation, and that this is reason enough for us to take care of our natural environment.<sup>104</sup> This approach has certainly the benefit of pointing out relevant resources in Christian tradition which have not been sufficiently underscored. The task of retrieving traditional teachings, overlooked texts, and historical religious figures, is

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<sup>104</sup> Haught, *The Promise of Nature*, 91.

undeniably important for any ecologically sensitive theology. Haught believes as well that a good dose of apologetics is actually needed in the face of many simplistic complaints and historically inaccurate interpretations of the role of Christianity as a source and cause of the ecological crisis. Nevertheless, the tradition-centered perspective does not go far enough in opening Christianity to the kind of self-renewal and reformation that the current challenges seem to demand. We know that Christian tradition, as the work of Paul Santmire has shown, is ambiguous in its depiction of and relationship with nature. Christian tradition is neither ecologically bankrupt nor replete with immediately accessible, albeit long-forgotten, ecological riches hidden everywhere in its deeper vaults.<sup>105</sup> The apologetic endeavor cannot therefore be the ground for an adequate ecologically sensitive theology, inasmuch as it affirms that there is nothing within Christian doctrines and symbols that needs to be transformed or reinterpreted in the face of the ecological crisis.

The second way of formulating an ecologically sensitive theology is the creation-centered or sacramental approach. According to Haught, as opposed to the apologetic enterprise, this perspective focuses less on normative religious texts or tradition, and more on the sacral quality of the cosmos itself. In this sense, it aims to acknowledge and unveil the revelatory character of nature. Nature is indeed sacramental, which means that nature in all of its beauty and diversity reveals the divine mystery, not just to Christians, of course, but to people of many traditions. Haught states that the sacramental approach has assumed different forms within Christianity, from natural theology to cosmic spirituality, and that it is found as well in different ways and degrees in non-Christian religions and even philosophical stances

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<sup>105</sup> H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 8.

such as deep ecology. One of the major and distinctive features of the creation-centered outlook is its recognition of the intrinsic value of every creature. All creatures are sacramental because of their intimate connection with the Creator, and therefore they are the primary symbolic disclosure of God. They are valuable in themselves and not just in relation to the usefulness or profit that humanity can obtain from them. In this sense, the sacramental perspective highlights the continuity of humans with the rest of the natural world, and proclaims the intimate relatedness among all creatures.

Haught asserts that all theological efforts guided by the sacramental viewpoint acknowledge the need for revision and reformation within Christianity. To take the ecological crisis seriously into account means that we need something more than simply retrieving and wheeling out classic texts and teachings. The sacramental perspective is currently revising these texts and teachings inasmuch as they must be “carefully sifted and reinterpreted in terms of a cosmological, relational, nonhierarchical, non-patriarchal, nondualistic and more organismic understanding of the universe.”<sup>106</sup> Moving beyond the defensive response which characterizes the apologetic endeavor, the sacramental perspective has launched a general revision of Christian doctrines and symbols which need to be reinterpreted and sometimes reformed in the face of the ecological crisis.

The sacramental perspective has brought to the fore the theological notion of creation. It explores this notion in dialogue with scientific accounts of reality which progressively portray an evolving universe that previous theological ages could never have imagined. The aim is to renew Christian narratives and their accounts of the relationships between God and creation,

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<sup>106</sup> Haught, *The Promise of Nature*, 95.

God and humanity, and humanity and other creatures. Haught thinks that the theological efforts grouped into the sacramental perspective are producing new results through what he calls a “recosmologizing” of traditional Christian teachings. First of all, this implies placing a fresh emphasis on the biblical theme of creation. Christian tradition has implicitly subordinated creation to the theme of redemption, and therefore the original goodness of the entire creation has been usually overlooked. There has been an excessive emphasis in the fallenness of nature as a consequence of the human fall that has impaired the recognition of the sacral quality of the entire creation that God declared to be good. Traditionally, nature seems to be just the background of the human salvific history. Conversely, the sacramental perspective states that the notions of ‘redemption’ and ‘reconciliation’ mean not only the restoring of the God-humanity relationship, but also the healing of the entire earth-community and indeed the renewal of the whole creation, beginning right now.<sup>107</sup> Secondly, along the same lines, the sacramental perspective understands Christ as a cosmic reality, and not simply as a personal historical savior. The retrieval of and emphasis on cosmic Christology entails that the origin and destiny of the whole universe and not just of human beings are in relation with Christ. Thirdly, ecotheology, guided by the sacramental approach, highlights the revelatory character of the universe. In this sense, the notion of revelation as God’s self-communication should not be restricted to human history and the Scriptures. Throughout its 14-billion-year history the whole cosmos is the most fundamental mode of the unveiling of divine mystery. Besides the renewal of the notion of revelation, the sacramental perspective proposes an ecological understanding of God, in which the Trinitarian relationships are the model and epitome of the relational

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<sup>107</sup> Haught, “Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe,” 234.

character of reality. The theological conception of the Trinity discloses that communion rather than substance is the basic structure of reality. In light of this, theology should see human beings inherently related to other creatures, which take part as well in the one single story of salvation. Every creature is an expression of God's self-communication and for this reason somehow participates in the very holiness of God. Therefore, the loss of biodiversity impacts our sense of God. Finally, the sacramental approach fosters new directions in spirituality and ethics inasmuch as it emphasizes the interrelatedness of all creatures as well as a non-dualistic vision of humanity. In this sense, there is a close connection between social and environmental challenges, and the latter will not be rightly faced without taking into account the former. We do not have to choose between attending human inequities and care for the flourishing of the larger earth-community.

When it comes to evaluating the sacramental approach, Haught asserts that one of its advantages is the revision and reinterpretation of the classic sources of Christian faith. It allows theology for a hermeneutic of suspicion about some of the same motifs that the apologetic perspective holds to be ecologically relevant and normative. Haught offers the example of the notion of human dominion or stewardship over creation, which seems to be the default position within the apologetic enterprise, but is considered rather inadequate in the sacramental viewpoint inasmuch as it fails to underscore that human beings belong to nature much more than it belongs to them. The sacramental perspective highlights as well the revelatory character of the whole universe and therefore enables theology to affirm that the integrity of nature is inseparable from the flourishing of religion. According to Haught this is

one of the major contributions of sacramental ecotheology which offers us a deeply religious reason for taking care of creation.

Haught considers that the sacramental perspective of ecotheology has basically two drawbacks. First, although it retrieves the biblical theme of creation, it does not consider sufficiently that the notion of creation within Scripture is eminently eschatological. In other words, creation unfolds within the Bible in a close connection with the fulfillment of God's promises vis-à-vis not only humanity but also the whole universe. These promises point toward their future fulfillment which somehow governs creation's destiny. In accentuating the sacramental character of the cosmos, the sacramental perspective turns our gaze toward the original blessing of creation or toward its present goodness as revelatory of God, but it is not able to encompass or thematize the future of God's creation. Second, creation-centered theology has difficulty providing a meaningful account of the limits of creation and of some of the components of life-systems such as violence, suffering, death, and pain. In this sense, it risks offering a romanticized portrayal of nature that stresses its goodness and intrinsic value, while omitting its perplexing features which do not readily fit with its allegedly revelatory character. This is why Haught thinks that even though the sacramental approach is a necessary complement for the apologetic endeavor and is a step forward toward an ecologically sensitive theology, it is unable to offer a fully biblical or a distinctively Christian ecotheology.

Consequently, Haught identifies and proposes a third rationale for an ecologically sensitive theology. This is what he calls the eschatological approach, and it is the one that Haught personally prefers. Although he thinks that every contemporary attempt to develop a meaningful ecotheology must be grounded in the sacramental interpretation of nature, he

nevertheless asserts that the biblical account of creation is oriented to the future and this is something that an actual Christian ecotheology must take into account. Revelation and the Scriptures are future-oriented. They point to the eschatological fulfillment of the divine promises. In this sense, the deepening of cosmology needs to be framed by eschatology, which is something that the sacramental approach fails to do. Haught states that the understanding of nature as promise is the overarching principle of the eschatological perspective. Indeed, as he states, the “notion of nature as promise brings together into a coherent vision the three domains of ecology, evolution, and eschatology.”<sup>108</sup> According to Haught we should not forget that, in the Bible, sacramentality is taken up into eschatology. The eschatological approach comprises therefore all theological efforts for building a significant ecotheology which are guided by the notion of nature as promise and the eschatological emphasis toward the future coming of God.

Some may object that the eschatological orientation is precisely one of the elements of Christianity that has contributed to human carelessness toward nature. Moreover, this approach may nurture the idea that human beings do not totally belong to the wider world of nature and that they are just pilgrims or sojourners upon the earth. Christianity has indeed predicated that humans are just *viators* in this world and that they need to accept this homeless character of their existence as a condition of redemptive liberation. In addition to this notion of human homelessness upon the earth, the future orientation of the Bible has apparently contributed to generate the ambiguous dream of progress, which has nowadays turned into the ideal of unlimited economic growth that has had harmful consequences for the

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<sup>108</sup> Haught, *God after Darwin*, 158.

environment and its resources. Therefore, some may say that Christianity is one of the causes of the current ecological crisis, exactly because of its eschatological accent which diverts our attention from the present to the future, and makes us sacrifice the present world at the expense of a promise of future fulfillment. Hence it is not manifest how a future-oriented ecotheology may be helpful in dealing with the prevailing environmental challenges.

Theological efforts guided by an eschatological emphasis need therefore to substantiate that hoping for the future fulfillment of divine promises is a condition of, and not a hindrance to, ecological commitment. Haught shows that process thought inspired by the work of Alfred North Whitehead, and theological stances such as those of Teilhard de Chardin and Jürgen Moltmann are a good example of future-oriented theology which is in tune with the biblical idea of divine promise and its future realization. Moreover, the new scientific account of the evolution of the universe brings to the fore the ideas of change, flux, openness, and novelty, which provide an interesting framework for an eschatological ecotheology. What science is showing is that the universe is a restless adventure, a process, an ongoing story that has been evolving for the last 14 billion years. In this sense, nature is not something finished, fixed, or static, as many still may believe, but it is rather an unfinished adventure open to what is perpetually new. The universe has been in movement as it were since its beginning, unfolding new horizons and opening new possibilities. According to Haught, this scientific account of the cosmos allows theology to think of the searching and future of humanity as part of or even an expression of the universe's own searching and movement. As Haught asserts "our human hunger for transcendence is a conscious development of a general leaning toward the open

future that has always been a hidden feature of the physical universe.”<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, theology can reasonably claim that religious homelessness, namely the sense of being in transit or pilgrimage upon the earth toward a future fulfillment, is perfectly in harmony with a sense of being at home within the cosmos. Humanity is part of a wider and larger story in which the whole universe looks forward to the fulfillment of divine promises. The eschatological approach reminds us that neither the theology of creation nor contemporary scientific accounts of the cosmos authorize us to restrict Christian hope to humanity. Divine promises encompass all creatures, and the future of humanity is tightly united to the future of the entire universe.

Ecotheology from an eschatological perspective has two major advantages compared to the apologetic and sacramental strategies. First, it resists any attempt to absolutize or sacralize the cosmos. Nature is still unfinished and not yet totally revelatory of God. Therefore it is not fully transparent to God. In this sense, the future-oriented perspective provides a suitable framework which allows theology to deal adequately with the limits of nature and other puzzling elements of life-systems such as violence, suffering, death, and pain. Second, portraying nature as promise rather than perfection is an effective antidote to those harmful practices against the Earth that regard the latter as limitless in its resourcefulness. We are bound to care and respect the Earth, not simply because God has given humanity the task of being the stewards of creation as the apologetic perspective asserts, or because the cosmos is a sacramental expression of the divine, as the creation-centered approach affirms. We should care for and respect creation because it is a promise yet to be fulfilled. In this sense, *to “destroy*

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<sup>109</sup> Haught, “Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe,” 243.

nature is to turn away from a promise.”<sup>110</sup> Along the same lines, Haught shows that while in the apologetic perspective environmental abuse is considered as disobedience to God’s call for humanity to be stewards of creation and in the sacramental approach it is interpreted as sacrilege inasmuch as environmental degradation entails the desecration of something somehow sacred, in eschatological ecotheology the lack of respect and care for creation is regarded as a form of despair. A future-oriented ecotheology better honors biblical revelation and its emphasis on eschatology as well as it enables theology to combine both the ambiguity and promise of nature.

**b. Rosemary Radford Ruether**

The American feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether thinks that all current Christian ecotheology endeavors can be divided in two different types: covenantal and sacramental.<sup>111</sup> These two types are rooted in the Scriptures and have evolved through history, acquiring a distinctive form in present theological reflection. Therefore, the covenantal and sacramental perspectives are biblical themes, which have developed through history and now are taken up or retrieved by ecotheology. They are not ready-made ecological ethics or spirituality, and they certainly need to be reinterpreted as they are marked by a legacy of patriarchy. However, she thinks that these two perspectives are complementary and necessary for a good ecotheology nowadays. They need to be interconnected for a sound

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<sup>110</sup> Haught, “Theology and the Environmental Crisis,” 55.

<sup>111</sup> See, Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 205–253; “Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church’s Mission,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religions of the World and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), 603–14; and, “The Biblical Vision of the Ecological Crisis,” in *Readings in Ecology & Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 75–81.

ecotheology able to inspire ethics and spirituality. In fact, they are in dialogue within the Scriptures and throughout Church history. The covenantal tradition has been deepened particularly by Protestant theologians, whereas the sacramental perspective is characteristic of the Catholic Church. Radford Ruether believes that while the work of Paul Santmire, James Gustafson, James Nash, Dieter Hessel and others represent the covenantal type of ecotheology, the sacramental perspective is epitomized by the work of Sallie McFague, Paulos Gregorios, Thomas Berry, and Sean McDonagh among many others.

The covenantal tradition according to Radford Ruether draws strongly from Hebrew Scriptures and claims the Bible as the primary source for ecotheology. She thinks that this tradition provides the foundation for a moral relation to nature and to one another that portrays forms of right relation, translating these right relations into law as the final assurance against abuse. One of the key features of the covenantal tradition is the rejection of the dualism between history and nature, which was introduced into biblical hermeneutics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by German exegetes. This dualism misrepresents the biblical data. Drawing upon the psalms, the prophets, and wisdom literature, the covenantal tradition shows how nature is alive and enters into a lively relation with God. There is an intimate and direct relationship between every creature and God. Everything that happens, from human wars or disasters, to rain, droughts, or abundant harvests, is seen in the biblical view as events in which the blessing or judgment of God is manifested. In this sense, all such events have a moral meaning inasmuch as they are the expression and outcome of the respect or breaking of God's call for right relations among creatures. Radford Ruether acknowledges the problems in reading moral meaning and divine will into natural events. Nevertheless, she believes that the Hebrew moral

sensibility takes on a new dimension of moral truth in which relation to God is the basis for both justice in society and prosperity in nature, while disobedience to God's commands of right relation brings both violence to society and disaster to nature.<sup>112</sup> The covenantal tradition does not affirm therefore that God is punishing or blessing people through natural events, but it rather emphasizes the close connection and mutual influence between disrupting the right relations that God has established for humans as well as for nature, and their mutual interaction. Infringing one of these right relations will necessarily result in fatal consequences for the other. The covenant in which God has engaged with the entire creation as well as the guidelines which stem from it should orient and govern the interaction between creatures.

Radford Ruether states that the covenantal tradition is deeply aware of the limits of human dominion over creation. This power and authority is always delegated. Nature is not human property, and human beings are called to be stewards of God's creation. In this sense, humanity needs to be faithful to what God has determined as right relations among all creatures. This perspective is embodied within the biblical view through the sabbatical legislation. The seven-day, seven-year, and the fiftieth year cycles, aim to preserve and renew the right relationship and just balance between humans, animals, and the land. While a special place for humans in creation is recognized, they are accountable for the welfare of creation to the true source of life, God. Therefore, humanity has responsibilities of care and protection toward the rest of creation. The covenantal tradition underlines the bond that unites every creature to the others as well as to the one source of life. This covenantal relation forbids human hostility or destructive practices vis-à-vis natures. For each "life form has its own

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<sup>112</sup> Radford Ruether, "Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission," 607.

purpose, its own right to exist, its own independent relation to God and to other beings.”<sup>113</sup> As a result of this, there is an otherness of every creature that human beings must respect.

The biblical notion of covenant is framed by patriarchal assumptions; therefore, it is androcentric, anthropocentric, and ethnocentric. Nevertheless these assumptions have been challenged and transformed through historical movements, such as universal male suffrage, abolitionism, women’s suffrage, and civil rights, in order to expand the limits of the covenant and encompass other members previously excluded. The anthropocentric bias has been the last to be confronted. Some theologians nowadays draw on the covenantal tradition in order to ground an ecotheology able both to recognize the value of every creature and describe the right relations between God, human beings, and nature. The covenantal tradition intends to express these right relations through an ethic which should be translated in turn into laws. This is crucial in building an ecological world order.

The sacramental tradition is the second type of ecotheology identified by Radford Ruether. She thinks that this perspective has been assumed fundamentally by Catholic theologians. The starting point of this tradition is the consideration of the community as a living whole, not simply the human community, but first of all the cosmic community. God is not only creating or making this cosmic body from afar, but God is also immanent within it. The visible universe and the entire creation are the manifestation of God, God’s sacramental body. Radford Ruether believes that one of the major features of this type of ecotheology is the retrieval of cosmic Christology which has been elaborated in some of Saint Paul’s letters such as Colossians, the Gospel of Saint John, and the letter to the Hebrews. In these texts Christ

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<sup>113</sup> Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 227.

appears as both the immanent divine source and ground of creation and its ultimate redemptive healer. He is the creator and the redeemer of the cosmos, and not just of human beings. He is the beginning and end of all things. In this sense, the theological themes of creation and redemption are synthesized and combined in the figure of the Logos-Christ, who is at the same time, the manifestation of God within creation, the immanent presence of God that sustains the cosmos, and the healing power that leads creation toward its fulfillment and its reconciliation to God.

Radford Ruether explains that, although this cosmological understanding of Christ as both creator and redeemer of the cosmos, and not just of human beings, is central to the New Testament perspective, Western Christianity for different reasons progressively overlooked this all-inclusive vision. Salvation became basically an affair between God and humanity, and the *analogia entis* – the ladder of ascent from creatures to God – is broken both ontologically and epistemologically.<sup>114</sup> The retrieval and deepening of Christian cosmological theology has started again over the twentieth century. Radford Ruether thinks that the work of theologians such as Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox represent the new impulse to rediscover and reinterpret this tradition of sacramental theology. She identifies diverse theological efforts inspired by the sacramental perspective, from the emphasis on God's original blessing on creation as the intrinsic nature of things that guides the theology of Matthew Fox, to other theological endeavors more rooted in scientific discoveries and the new earth story of evolution, such as those unfolded by followers of Teilhard de Chardin, and those based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead on process thought. Radford Ruether describes the development of an

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 238.

ecofeminist theology and spirituality in the wake of this revival of sacramental cosmology. This perspective needs to be built on the notions of the living interdependency of all things, and the value of the personal in communion, which underline the kinship among all creatures and the idea of an earth community. All creatures share the same origin, are sustained by the same source of life, and partake of the same destiny. This sense of equality and communion should orient the relationships among human beings and nature. Ecotheology inspired by the sacramental tradition points toward this direction.

**c. Willis Jenkins**

In his book *Ecologies of Grace. Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* Willis Jenkins provides a typology that unveils three strategies which environmental Christian ethics has been exploring in order to relate religious experience to environmental challenges.<sup>115</sup> He believes that Lynn White's article has marked much of the subsequent debate within ecotheology to the point of establishing as its two major foci the degree of anthropocentrism of Christian narratives, and the influence of worldviews on assigning value to nature as well as triggering and fostering particular human practices. As a result of this, cosmology seems to be the best field to link environmental problems to a religious rationale. Nevertheless, Jenkins thinks that ecotheology should move in its reflection beyond both the frame provided by White's thesis, and cosmology as the most suitable arena to tie in the religious vision of reality and the emergent environmental problems. If religion is concerned about nature and grace, then soteriology must have a part in how ecotheology succeeds in substantiating why environmental concern and commitment are inherent to Christian faith. Consequently, Jenkins

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<sup>115</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*.

presents three strategies of Christian environmental ethics nurtured by three different understandings of grace, namely, sanctification, redemption, and deification. He thinks that these three broad understandings of God's grace give rise to the theological strategies of ecojustice, stewardship, and ecological spirituality respectively. Moreover, these three strategies seem to represent in Jenkins' view three major ecclesial traditions, namely, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. Therefore, Jenkins shows how the theological rationale underlying the understanding of God's grace shapes different patterns of Christian response to environmental problems. He does not opt for any of these theological strategies as the most suitable for connecting Christian faith with ecological commitment, but rather shows their capacities and challenges, and considers plurality within Christian environmental ethics as a necessary fertile ground.

Before entering into theological reflection, Jenkins analyzes three ways in which environmental ethics has been dealing with ecological challenges. He does so because he thinks that the theological strategies somehow correlate and modify these philosophical stances. The first one is what is called the *nature's standing strategy* which basically draws normative obligations from the moral status of the nonhuman world or certain members of it. While some authors affirm that nature possesses an intrinsic value, others ascribe value to non-human species by recognizing human features in them such as sentience, emotional fellowship, and the capacity to work for others. Humanity is bound to respect and protect the somehow objective values of the natural world. Therefore, the nature's moral standing strategy focuses on moral obligations whose source is the moral status of nature. The second philosophical strategy that tries to make environmental problems intelligible to moral experience organizes

around the notion of human agency. It focuses primarily therefore on human practices that are disastrous for nature. The human agency strategy critiques the previous strategy inasmuch as it affirms that there is no such thing as objective knowledge of nature. Not only the concepts through which we grasp nature, but nature itself indeed is influenced and somehow determined by human practices. Nature is mainly socially constructed. Consequently, cultural imagination, social structures, technological frameworks, and political power are crucial for environmental ethics through the lens of the human agency strategy. Thus, it is exactly these powers, practices, and imaginations that must be examined, revised, and reconstructed. The third philosophical approach to environmental ethics unfolds from the notion of ecological subjectivity. Its starting point is the communion or interconnectedness, and not the division, between humanity and nature. It criticizes the human agency strategy insofar as the latter loses sight of real organisms, living creatures, concrete relationships, and the impact that nature has on the way we conceive not only ourselves, but also society and ethical values. This third strategy therefore insists on the importance and influence of nature on human socialization and the formation of selfhood. We need to reimagine humanity, starting from its radical dependence on and intimate bond with nature. The ecological subjectivity strategy suspects that the logics of division between humanity and nature are usually associated with logics of domination. The goal is not to collapse the differences, but rather to deconstruct the dynamics of speciesism in order to create better ways of relationality.

Jenkins thinks that these three strategies together provide an outline of practical rationality for environmental ethics. The latter therefore “does require at least a minimal account of how the natural world makes claims on moral agency, how agential practices

condition the natural world, and how human personhood is ecologically shaped.”<sup>116</sup> Jenkins also uses the image of light, saying that the intelligibility of environmental ethics is illuminated by the light of nature, the light of social practices, and the light of human belonging to the earth.

The Christian theological strategies to make environmental problems intelligible to religious experience and faith, according to Jenkins, relate to one or more of these practical criteria, and transform the philosophical strategies. The first one is the Ecojustice strategy. As mentioned above, Jenkins thinks that this strategy is the one preferred by Roman Catholic theologians. It organizes itself around the notion of the integrity of creation, and emphasizes the direct relationship independent from humanity that God holds with the rest of creatures. The value of nature lies in its relation to God, the Creator, and not in its relation to human profit or benefit. Thus, this value is both self-possessed and divinely granted. God holds a loving regard toward creation for its own sake.

Ecojustice posits the notion of justice as its overarching moral category, and in this way is able to combine the problems of both human exploitation and environmental abuse in a noncompetitive manner. Christians are called to respect the caring, compassionate, and protective way in which God relates to creation. In other words, Christians should model the way they behave toward creation upon the relationship that God maintains with every creature. God is reconciling humanity as well as all of creation, and humans need to be in tune with God’s own way of relating with creation. In this sense, humanity must take part in natural processes and patterns, being faithful to how God relates to them. Consequently, the ecojustice

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 59.

strategy exhibits an understanding of grace as sanctifying. Christians participate in this sanctifying grace insofar as they adjust to and connect with the manner in which God relates to all of creation. Put differently, they are grasped by sanctifying grace inasmuch they do justice to creation.

Jenkins thinks that there are two unresolved points in the ecojustice strategy. First, it does not clarify how being respectful for and faithful to creation's integrity leads humanity toward friendship with God. In other words, theologians who exhibit an ecojustice strategy in linking environmental challenges with religious experience, do not clarify how loving and caring for creation would be a medium for God's grace toward humanity. In this sense, they need to elaborate further the ways through which nature may carry humanity into intimacy with God. Second, theologians working within the frame of ecojustice strategy need to pin down and deepen the notion of creation's integrity. There is no agreement or clarity about which features of nature express and epitomize creation's integrity. In this sense, the question about the hallmarks of nature that disclose divine will and providence is legitimate. Moreover, the ecojustice strategy exhibits troubles in giving a meaningful account of some features of nature such as violence, suffering, and death, which seem to contradict God's loving care for every creature and for all creation. Are these characteristics of nature part of its integrity or are they just the expression of evil, a distortion of how God would have creation, and therefore they represent something that needs to be overcome? If humanity is called not only to respect but also follow the manner in which God cares for and relates to creation, the ecojustice strategy needs to develop further these questions.

The second theological strategy for showing that caring for creation is an essential part of Christian faith that Jenkins identifies is the stewardship strategy. As mentioned above, this theological rationale has been developed especially by Protestant theologians. Unlike the first one, this strategy organizes itself, as its name suggests, around the notion of stewardship. Human beings are God's stewards within creation, and are called to respect and care for creation as God's representatives on earth. Consequently, this strategy grounds human responsibility vis-à-vis other creatures in God's commands and mandates for respectful and loving relationship with creation. This strategy therefore goes back to biblical accounts of how God invites and entrusts to humanity the caring and welfare of all creatures. The main focus of this strategy is thus faithful human practices to the call for earthkeeping that human beings have received from God.

Jenkins thinks that the stewardship strategy exhibits an understanding of grace as redemption. All of creation comes from God as a gift, and human beings must administer it faithfully on his behalf. In this sense, this strategy places the importance of environmental challenges within the framework of the God-humanity relationship. Human beings are God's representatives and counterparts within the earth, and they are accountable to God for the exercise of this role. Consequently, environmentally friendly practices are not performed primarily because of nature's dignity, but rather because of God's will and divine command which humans are asked to respect and comply with. In other words, humanity cares for what God has entrusted to it.

One of the controversial aspects of the stewardship strategy is its understanding of the role and position of humanity within creation. It is certainly liable to being accused of

promoting an unacceptable anthropocentrism that seems to justify abusive and exploitative practices toward nature. This is why the first move of those working within the frame of this strategy is to disavow the charge of fostering limitless human dominion over creation. On the one hand, they highlight biblical passages other than Genesis 1 which display the type of actions God is asking humanity to perform, such as guarding and tending (Genesis 2). On the other hand, they rethink and reinterpret the notion of dominion in order to show that the biblical text does not substantiate a limitless exploitation of nature. Inasmuch as the task of subduing and having dominion over the earth is carried out on behalf of God, it necessarily implies limits and obligations that must be respected. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the stewardship strategy establishes an ontological differentiation between humanity and the rest of creatures. Only the former has been chosen to bear the image of God, and live within the earth as representative and delegate of God's rule over creation.

The stewardship strategy focuses ultimately on Jesus as the one who discloses God's attitudes toward creation. Accordingly, it inscribes the call to be steward within the general call to discipleship. In this sense, there cannot be faith in Christ without care for creation. As Jenkins explains "environmental stewardship is first and finally Christian discipleship."<sup>117</sup> Christians are hence invited to associate themselves with the redemptive work of Christ, who liberates creation and humanity, restores the *imago Dei* in human beings, and leads creation toward authentic fulfillment. Christians are rightful stewards inasmuch as they model their own behavior upon Jesus' life and ministry. Therefore, those theologians who subscribe to the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 82.

stewardship strategy portray the character of true stewardship according to the pattern of Christ's rule.

Jenkins thinks that there are three major unresolved points in this strategy. Firstly, in focusing on the figure of Christ for modeling the true nature of stewardship, this strategy radicalizes the role of the steward toward something much bigger than mere administration of what has been entrusted. Christ not only suffers but also gives his life in ransom for all creation. Consequently the question about the scope and implications of faithful stewardship to Jesus' example is a legitimate one. Are Christians called simply to the respectful and diligent administration of creation, or are they invited to more extreme acts, which would be more in tune with Jesus' salvific and redemptive work? Secondly, the same question addressed to the first strategy arises here again, namely, is nature in need of redemption simply from human exploitative practices, or is it itself disfigured and distorted, and therefore in need of salvific restoration? In other words, how should Christians interpret those features of nature that seem to be in opposition to Christ's redemptive work, such as violence, predation, suffering, and death? How are they supposed to deal with these hallmarks? In this sense, Jenkins thinks that this strategy needs to elaborate further what grace makes of nature, in order to clarify how stewardship relates to natural features, especially to those that matter for fashioning good environmental practices. Finally, the link between faithful stewardship and Christ's redemptive work needs to be clarified and deepened. It is not clear how the fact of administering and caring for creation would participate in the work of Christ. Moreover, this seems to reinforce the accusation of bad anthropocentrism that this strategy would imply for Christianity. If stewardship apparently stands for collaborating with Christ's redemptive work, this means that

humanity is portrayed as having not only a delegated role regarding the rest of creatures, but a principal one.

The third strategy that Jenkins identifies among Christian theologians is what he calls the creation spirituality strategy. The latter emphasizes the ecological dimensions of fully Christian personhood, in order to render environmental commitment essential to religious experience. In this sense, it does not start from nature's dignity or human practices in prior isolation, but rather it unfolds from the intimate communion between humanity and the rest of creatures. At the heart of human experience lies the fact that they are not only dependent on all of creation, but they are in close connection with the rest of creatures. The denial of this fact and the sharp division between humanity and nature is indeed the main source of current environmental challenges. Human beings therefore discover their role and place within creation first of all by acknowledging their interconnectedness and dependence upon all of creation. Humanity needs to see itself as a living cosmology, a real manifestation of both the profound communion within creation and the solidarity among all creatures.

Although this strategy encompasses diverse approaches, Jenkins thinks that it is mostly represented by the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Those who inscribe their work within the frame of the ecological spirituality strategy, hold an understanding of grace as divinizing. God is leading creation toward its fulfillment, and human beings take part in this same process. In this sense, humanity shares the same origin with the rest of creation, is sustained in the present by the same source of life, and is heading toward the same destiny. The creation story and the story of Jesus confirm that the whole of creation, human beings included, is animated by the power of God and is called to partake of divine life.

Consequently, the strategy of ecological spirituality links together anthropology and cosmology. There cannot be the former without the latter, and vice versa. The notion of creativity is usually the joining point, “because it names a dynamism shared by creation generally and humanity peculiarly, and, in the movement of creation toward self-realization, the mode of their communion.”<sup>118</sup> Humanity hence epitomizes an entire movement of *autopoiesis* which is shared by all of creation. In this sense, human beings are the conscious expression of a much bigger cosmic story. The strategy of ecological spirituality therefore combines three different kinds of creativity, namely, divine, cosmic, and human. In other words, it tightly associates three distinctive but interlocked elements, nature's own agency, human participation in divine grace, and God's action within creation.

As with the other two strategies, Jenkins believes that there are two unclarified points in this third theological endeavor. First, it is not clear which of all nature's major hallmarks are expressions of its creativity and of its journey toward fulfillment, and which of them are to be discarded and overlooked. If humanity is asked to concur and be in tune with nature's unfolding creativity, then an array of seemingly conflicting features are displayed for its consideration, namely, order, balance, hierarchy, chaos, change, flux, and network. The same can be said about those elements of nature that seem to contradict God's divinizing work, such as predation, violence, and suffering. Theology needs hence to elaborate further the criteria to identify and enhance those characteristics of nature that apparently are manifestations of divine agency through nature's own creative power. Second, theologians inspired by the ecological spirituality strategy need to deepen their depiction of divine agency within creation.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 97.

While some soteriological metaphors serve to express God's work within creation, such as redeeming, reshaping, recreating, or divinizing, it is not plain how God carries out this work. Moreover, it is necessary to clarify not only the way through which God relates to creation and divine agency operates within the cosmos, but it is also important to better describe and depict the end toward which creation is being led.

#### ***d. The State of Ecotheology***

These typologies offered by Haught, Radford Ruether, and Jenkins, give a glimpse of the plurality of voices, as well as the diversity of topics, emphases, and strategies within ecotheology. There are certainly many other works that aim to map and charter the field of ecotheology, such as the handbook of ecotheology authored by Celia Deane-Drummond, in order to shed light upon the rationale of this emergent theological reflection, and its own challenges and tensions.<sup>119</sup> A recent publication edited by Ernst Conradie, Sigurd Bergman, Denis Edwards and Celia Deane-Drummond, explores the current paths and new horizons within Christian ecotheology.<sup>120</sup> This volume is the culmination of a process of ecumenical collective theological reflection started in 2007 and entitled: the Christian Faith and the Earth project, and gathers the outcome of a conference of the same title held in South Africa in August 2012. The aim of this project was to describe and assess the current state of the debate

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<sup>119</sup> See, for instance, Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*; "What Are the Resources for Building a Christian Ethos in a Time of Ecological Devastation?", in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst Conradie et al. (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 157–76, where the author presents the major trends and developments within ecotheology; and the special number of the journal *Theology* about the mapping of ecotheology: January/February 2013, 116 (1), which presents the outcomes of a colloquium held in San Francisco in 2011 entitled *The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology*.

<sup>120</sup> Ernst Conradie et al., eds., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

in Christian ecotheology and to offer a sense of direction for the way forward. Therefore, although it may sound presumptuous, it is worth asking about the major conclusions we can draw from the origin, development and present state of ecotheology. Despite the diversity of geographic and social contexts, the variety of confessional traditions and theological stances, and the plurality of languages, within which ecotheology is being unfolded, I aim to draw some general conclusions about the current state of ecotheology. I believe that these conclusions are important both for assessing the nature of ecotheology, and for locating it within the large spectrum of theological reflection.

First of all, ecotheology does not structure itself around an original method or a new group of methodologies within theology. There is no such thing, at least up to now, as specific steps or principles which would establish a distinctive way of doing ecotheology. There is not yet a recognizable specific method that can be identified from the analysis of the wide array of theological works that claim to stand under the notion of ecotheology. Unlike other new contemporary methods in theology such as liberation theology and feminist theology, ecotheology has not yet articulated its own particular method which would be characteristic of its theological stance. The Earth Bible project embodies one of the most systematic attempts to offer a distinctive method for ecotheology, in this case when reading the Scriptures. The six principles put forward by the Earth Bible team guided by the Australian Lutheran exegete Norman Habel, provide a framework for interpreting the sacred texts through an ecological lens. Yet, formulated in such a broad language so as to foster apparently a wider interdisciplinary dialogue, these principles show no explicit connection with the Bible and the Christian tradition itself. While these principles aim to guide a hermeneutic of suspicion and

recovery of the Bible from an ecological viewpoint, it is not clear how they emerge from either a particular reading of the Scriptures or a legitimate appropriation of Christian tradition. Consequently, they lose much of their ability to persuade or provide a convincing reading of the Scriptures within this tradition.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, it can be said that up to this point of its development, ecotheology has not yet exhibited a new method or methodologies for doing theology from an ecological perspective.

Secondly, despite its lack of definite method, ecotheology has grown as an independent field within theological reflection, and has unfolded around some methodological tools such as the dialogue with scientific accounts of life and cosmology, some specific themes, some general strategies, and an overarching sensitivity that tries to take into account the challenge which the ecological crisis represents for theology. As has been mentioned above, ecotheology aspires to a twofold goal, namely, a Christian critique of the values, beliefs, and practices which underlie the ecological crisis, on the one hand, and the ecological reformation of Christianity both in its teaching and in its practice, on the other hand. Canadian theologian Heather Eaton summarizes the major approaches in ecotheology, apparently evoking the three expected actions for the treatment of waste (reuse, reduce, and recycle), through the ideas of retrieval, reinterpretation, and reconstruction. Although she speaks of three prevalent methods, I believe

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<sup>121</sup> For an introduction to the Earth Bible project and the principles proposed for an ecological interpretation of the Bible see, Norman C. Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 24–53, and “The Origins and Challenges of an Ecojustice Hermeneutic,” in *Relating to the Text: Interdisciplinary and Form-Critical Insights on the Bible*, ed. Timothy J. Sandoval and Carleen Mandolfo (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 290–306. For a critical assessment of these principles see, David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (August 1, 2008): 219–38; David G. Horrell, “The Ecological Challenge to Biblical Studies,” *Theology* 112 (2009): 163–71; Ernst Conradie, “Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project,” *Scriptura* 85 (2004): 123–35, and, “What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. David Horrell et al. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 295–313.

that these three actions: retrieval, reinterpretation, and reconstruction, as well as the way they have been performed within ecotheology, do not embody a new method in theology, but they rather provide specific theological strategies for linking the ecological crisis with the Scriptures and Christian tradition. Ecotheology offers therefore a new perspective, emphasis, or sensitivity, one to which we were blind before becoming conscious of the current ecological crisis, that allows us to retrieve, reinterpret, and reconstruct elements of the Scriptures and Tradition. Ecotheology is hence a turning of the head toward theology's historical blind spots, in order to retrieve, reinterpret, and reconstruct our beliefs and faith, through an ecologically friendly theology. Rooted in a new awareness, this theologically independent field crosses into systematics, ethics, history, biblical studies, liturgy, and spirituality, and has "signaled a comprehensive reform, as well as a new expression of Christianity."<sup>122</sup> Ecotheology aims to relate ecologically friendly practices and beliefs to the deepest convictions and symbols of the Christian faith.

Thirdly, ecotheology is not just another expression of what has been called contextual theology.<sup>123</sup> It is true that theological reflection is always contextual, in the sense that it is rooted in distinctive social, economic, historical, and geographic coordinates. Theology is always done from a specific location which inevitably implies presuppositions, biases, resources, and blind spots. Although theology is hence always attached to a particular context, in denying that ecotheology is just another example of contextual theology I intend to state that it is not the mere expression of local challenges. While embodied in local manifestations

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<sup>122</sup> Heather Eaton, "Where Do We Go from Here? Methodology, Next Steps, Social Change," in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Sigurd Bergmann et al. (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 199.

<sup>123</sup> See, for instance, Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002).

and challenges, the ecological crisis is undoubtedly a worldwide reality. Therefore, this crisis calls for retrievals, reinterpretations and reconstructions of Christian tradition and the Bible, which touch the whole of theological reflection. Ecological challenges cannot be alien to any dimension of theology, nor to any theological endeavor, no matter its geographical, economic, social, and historical location. These challenges should not be dismissed by invoking regional differences and pretending that they have a local limited impact upon theological reflection. This is why labeling ecotheology as contextual theology can be misleading. Yet, it is undeniable that local contexts and regional particularities highly enrich and influence the development of ecotheology. As a result of this, ecotheology combines general ecological concerns, cultural and geographical particularities, and local strategies, for shaping an ecologically friendly theology able to shake up as well as inspire people's minds in their search for paths to a true and fruitful life.

Fourthly, as can be inferred from the analysis of ecotheology's diverse typologies, the twofold goal of a Christian critique of the values and beliefs at the root of the ecological crisis as well as the ecological reformation of Christianity, requires more than a mere retrieval of elements within the Scriptures and Christian Tradition previously overlooked. Ecotheology must not only elicit theological memory, but it also needs to embrace an authentic reformation of Christian practices and beliefs which the growing ecological awareness entails. Therefore, while the apologetic effort is important in dealing with deficient historical accounts and inaccurate biblical interpretations, it needs to be supplemented with other constructive perspectives that aim to revise and reinterpret Christian data. Consequently, it is especially important to explore the manner and the extent to which this reformation affects the main symbols and doctrines of

Christianity. Alongside the necessary urgency of dealing with practical ecological concerns, ecotheology needs to re-envision the major doctrines and symbols of Christian faith. Failing to do this, it would have the impact of keeping ecological commitment as something extrinsic or alien to Christianity. If ecology has to do with how people not only conceive of but also live out their existence, then it is crucial that ecotheology undertake an ecological reformation of the main symbols and doctrines of Christianity, unveiling some of their assumptions, presuppositions, and misunderstandings in their depiction of God, creation, humanity, the Church, and so forth, which the ecological crisis has put into question. The rising ecological awareness is therefore a catalyst for a new and deeper appropriation of the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

Finally, one of the major aspects which needs to be revisited is theological anthropology. Even though Christianity has been accused of holding an anthropocentric viewpoint, it is manifest, through the analysis of ecotheology's different strategies for linking Christianity to the ecological crisis, that the way in which humanity is conceived in its relation with God and other creatures as well as in its role within creation is a divisive issue. Indeed, ecotheology contests what seems to be both the classic theological narrative and default position about human beings, namely, that they have been created by God, bear God's image, have a special status within the created order, and have been asked to subdue and rule over creation. This understanding of humanity is problematic not merely for what it affirms, but rather and especially for what it seems to imply vis-à-vis other creatures. As mentioned above, it is worth noting that the questioning that ecotheology implies for this classic narrative about humanity has not been widely received. It is still possible and unfortunately not infrequent to

encounter theological reflections about human beings that uncritically repeat this standard depiction of humanity. Yet, ecotheology has been revising those presuppositions, assumptions, and implications of classic theological anthropology that are at odds with what the rising ecological awareness requires from believers. By its retrieving, reinterpreting and reconstructing Christian doctrines and symbols, ecotheology is in search of re-envisioning what it means to be human. It knows that this is crucial to building an alternative ethos.

## **2. Three Contentious Spheres: Dignity, Uniqueness, and the Role of Humanity within Creation**

Ecotheology has called into question three main assumptions of classic theological anthropology: the dignity, uniqueness, and role of humanity within creation. It is not that ecotheology *a priori* denies that humanity is unique in God's eyes, or that human beings have a specific mission vis-à-vis the rest of creation, but rather it demands a clarification about whether there are theological bases for these claims or not, and what they actually can and cannot mean. Christian anthropology has classically addressed such questions with reference to the affirmation that human beings are created "in the image of God" (*imago Dei*), to the point that the interpretation of this notion influences almost every major contribution to theological anthropology. Despite the different understandings of the *imago Dei*, it has typically been understood as the theological expression of human uniqueness. Because they are God's image-bearers, human beings have been granted a special status and role within the created order. From this viewpoint, the *imago Dei* therefore epitomizes human distinctiveness vis-à-vis other creatures. Humanity is special in God's eyes, and it has not only a special place but also a task within creation.

The notion of the *imago Dei* has been increasingly criticized.<sup>124</sup> Besides the criticism that comes from feminist theology, ecotheology has also called into question this notion, inasmuch as it seems untenable in its classic interpretation. First of all, a deeper knowledge of cosmological and biological evolution has triggered some discussion about whether a seemingly absolute human distinctiveness can be meaningfully affirmed. We are made of stardust and we have emerged within the evolutionary history which shows our deep kinship with other creatures.<sup>125</sup> Secondly, the growing ecological awareness denounces the potential ethical ambiguity of affirming a strong sense of human superiority. The notion of *imago Dei* is indeed usually associated with the mandate of subduing and having dominion over the rest of creation found in Genesis (1, 26-28). In this sense, the theological recognition of human beings as God's image-bearers has been historically a fertile ground not only to affirm human distinctiveness, but also to substantiate exploitative practices that portray other creatures as mere resources to be used for human benefit. Many suspect that the dynamic of differentiation between human and other creatures, has become a source of domination, where the earth and even the cosmos are seen just as the background of the human salvific story. Nevertheless, as James Nash states, "the traditional idea that the earth, or even the universe, was created solely for humans is, in our scientific age, sinfully arrogant, biologically naïve, cosmologically silly, and therefore theologically indefensible."<sup>126</sup> While it is true that other theological positions counteract and disavow this understanding of human distinctiveness which conceives of humanity as the crown of creation, it is still sufficiently manifest that the place and role of humanity in the created

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<sup>124</sup> See, for instance, Kathryn Tanner, "Creation, Environmental Crisis, and Ecological Justice," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 99–123.

<sup>125</sup> See Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 7–26.

<sup>126</sup> James A. Nash, "Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity," *Interpretation* 50, no. 1 (1996): 8.

order remain in these perspectives at best ambiguous. Some have sharply pointed out that it is a mistake to narrow down theological discussion to the theme of anthropocentrism, as well as to sort theological strategies according to their place on an anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric continuum.<sup>127</sup> Doing so would be an abstraction that misunderstands the real diversity of theological stances, and simplifies their theological rationale. Yet, it is undeniable that ecotheology has brought the notion of *imago Dei* to the fore, in order to question and clarify what it conveys about human dignity, uniqueness, and the role of human beings within creation.

#### **a. Human Dignity**

Human dignity has been a crucial cornerstone in many theological debates. It is theologically supported, as David Hollenbach asserts, by the biblical teaching in the book of Genesis that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>128</sup> In this sense, persons possess a worth and deserve to be treated with reverence. The notion of human dignity is decisive to oppose any kind of domination in the name of gender, race, class and age differences. It finds theologically the universal validity of human rights and entails that there can be no distinctions or degrees concerning the worth of persons. Human dignity is therefore one and indivisible, and its acknowledgment and defense can be considered as one of the most important contributions of Christianity to equality among human beings.

Nevertheless, human dignity becomes problematic when compared to the rest of creation. Does it imply that other creatures are less valuable than human beings? Is the claim of

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<sup>127</sup> See, for instance, Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*.

<sup>128</sup> David Hollenbach, "Human Dignity in Catholic Thought," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marcus Düwell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 252.

human dignity a sign of humanity's higher value or is it just a sign of an anthropocentric bias which fails to recognize the intrinsic and equal value of all creatures? Is there any hierarchy of value among creatures? If yes, what would be its source and rationale? Should dignity be ascribed only to humans or also to non-human living beings?

In May 1992 an amendment to the Swiss Federal Constitution introduced the notion of the dignity of non-human creatures. This amendment says that the federal government in its regulations of gene technologies shall take into account the dignity of non-human creatures, namely, animals, plants and other organisms. This amendment is a sign that people worry about moral problems caused by genetic engineering, and it expresses the necessity of setting limits to human interference with the life of animals, plants, and other organisms. Yet, what does it mean to affirm the dignity of non-human creatures? And, what are the limits to human activity that this notion entails? In face of these questions the Swiss authorities appointed two committees to clarify the notion of the dignity of non-human creatures and define its implications especially for genetic engineering. The reports of these committees gave expression to two positions that were prevalent in the discussion. While some proposed that the notion of the dignity of non-human creatures should be understood as an extension of the notion of human dignity applied to other living organisms, others stated that the notion of the dignity of non-human creatures should be seen as corresponding to the notion of the inherent value of non-human beings.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> For a more detailed discussion see, Robert Heeger, "Dignity Only for Humans? A Controversy," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marcus Düwell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 541–45., and Peter Schaber, "Dignity Only for Humans? On the Dignity and Inherent Value of Non-Human Beings," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marcus Düwell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 546–50.

This philosophical and legal debate has its expression within theology as well. Facing the question of human dignity and its seemingly anthropocentric overtones, some propose to extend the meaning of the notion of the *imago Dei* in order to encompass within it other living creatures beyond humanity. Without recognizing other creatures as God's image-bearers, others assert that the intrinsic value of every creature has sufficient theological foundation, and it should be therefore affirmed. Theologian David Cunningham, for instance, asserts that the tendency to construct a great theological divide between humanity and other creatures is usually based on a fairly simplistic reading of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. He thinks that even if we were able to "agree on both the unique applicability of the *imago Dei* to human beings and the specification of its theological meaning, we would still not be able to agree on how much theological distance between human beings and other animals would be specified by such claims."<sup>130</sup> Exploring the grammar of the word 'image' and analyzing the biblical text, Cunningham concludes that the use of the notion of the *imago Dei* to substantiate the unique status of human beings depends on both an argument of silence and a willingness to turn a blind eye to the highly contested nature of this notion. In other words, he thinks that theologians have classically assumed that human beings are created in the image of God and that other creatures are not relying on an argument of silence. While affirming that humanity is God's image-bearer in fact, the Scriptures do not deny the possibility that other creatures can image their Creator as well. Furthermore, the interpretation of the *imago Dei* is a highly controversial field, and theologians have typically grounded its meaning relying on philosophical or scientific arguments which assume some distinctions between human beings

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<sup>130</sup> David Cunningham, "The Way of All Flesh: Rethinking the Imago Dei," in *Creaturally Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009), 110.

and other creatures. Therefore, Cunningham thinks that the *imago Dei* “can also describe other elements of the created order – and that, in fact, the entire creation bears the ‘mark of the Maker’ to at least some degree.”<sup>131</sup> He does not propose however a grand levelling of creation, in which no species or element would be distinguished from any other element. Acknowledging differences among creatures, he rather thinks that these differences “will always be matters of degree rather than a simple opposition of inclusion and exclusion from the attribution ‘created in the image of God’.”<sup>132</sup> Cunningham argues for a greater consideration of the term “flesh” as a better starting-point for reflection on the relationships among elements of the created order.

Other authors have taken the same path of extending image-bearing to other creatures. Celia Deane-Drummond, for instance, asserts that it is incorrect to exclude the possibility of a form of image-bearing that is suited to particular animal species in relation to their own kinds.<sup>133</sup> Relying on the works of Franz de Waal and Marc Bekoff, she ascribes a form of morality to some animals, inasmuch as they are able to make judgements about right and wrong within their contexts of specific social life. In this sense, she thinks that “there may be a distinct form of image-bearing that is true for that particular species, in so far as it reflects a tendency towards the good, as judged according to their own kind.”<sup>134</sup> Like humans, therefore, animals also can mirror something of the glory of God. The difference between humans and non-humans when speaking of the *imago Dei* seems to be one of degree rather than absolute

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, “Are Animals Moral? Taking Soundings through Vice, Virtue, Conscience and Imago Dei,” in *Creaturally Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009), 209.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 210.

distinction. As will be shown, Deane-Drummond has since taken her distance from this argument.

Australian theologian Denis Edwards asserts that the notion of *imago Dei* should not be dismissed within ecotheology and that it can be freed from its connections with the language of domination. He, too, believes that the notion of image-bearer can be applied to non-human creatures. In this sense, the notion of *imago Dei* can be retrieved for an ecotheology that situates human beings in relationship to other creatures, “and that understands each creature as in its own way reflecting and imaging God.”<sup>135</sup> Edwards states that although the Bible and the Christian tradition use the language of the image of God specifically of the human, they also see the whole of creation, and the diversity of life on Earth, as the self-expression of God, and, in this sense, as imaging God. Relying on a sacramental viewpoint he argues therefore for an extension of the notion of *imago Dei* to other creatures. Nonetheless, this does not imply for Edwards denying human uniqueness or weakening the notion of the dignity of the human person made in the divine image which remains central to the Christian social justice tradition. He thinks that what is “needed is neither the extreme of anthropocentrism that offers no respect for the dignity of other creatures, nor the biocentrism that rejects the unique dignity of the human person.”<sup>136</sup> In a recent article, he develops the same ideas and asserts that there is little sense in attempting to minimize the uniqueness of the human.<sup>137</sup> Edwards argues therefore for a theocentric perspective that, on the one hand, can ground and recognize the

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<sup>135</sup> Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 14.

<sup>136</sup> Denis Edwards, “Anthropocentrism and Its Ecological Critique. A Theological Response,” in *Being Human: Groundwork for a Theological Anthropology for the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Kirchhoffer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 114.

<sup>137</sup> Denis Edwards, “Human and Other Creatures: Creation, Original Grace, and Original Sin,” in *Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology, and Resource Extraction*, ed. Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 2015), 159–70.

intrinsic value of every creature inasmuch as they reflect something of their creator, and, on the other hand, that is able to acknowledge the specialness of human beings within the created order.

Many are those therefore who search to counteract the ecological crisis through a wider understanding of the *imago Dei* that encompasses other creatures than humans and recognizes their intrinsic value. In doing so, they aim to ground theologically not only the dignity and value of every creature as they mirror something of the glory of their Creator, but also the rootedness of humanity within the larger earth community. Even though this strategy attempts correctly to confront a certain anthropocentrism, which not only overemphasizes human distinctiveness but also values other creatures merely for their benefit to human life, I think that there is as yet no evidence sufficient to substantiate theologically the understanding of other creatures as God's image-bearers. Furthermore, it seems to me that this strategy of expanding the meaning of the *imago Dei* does not achieve the expected result. First of all, in this strategy other animals begin to be absorbed into the human world, and they are less appreciated in what is characteristic and proper to them. As this strategy is based on shared capacities or features between human and other animals, the special place of other creatures in their relation with God and humanity can be jeopardized, inasmuch as greater attention is paid to those creatures that are most like human beings. In a recent article, moving away from her previous strategy, Celia Deanne-Drummond, for instance, advises against conceiving other creatures as God's image-bearers. She thinks that "if other animals are to be thought of as only weakly bearing the image of God, it still seems to put other animals on the same hierarchical scale as humans, and they are then

found wanting.”<sup>138</sup> Those arguing for an expansion of the notion of the *imago Dei* do not obliterate the differences among creatures. They rather underline that the language of God’s image-bearers should not be restricted to human beings, and that all creatures reflect in their own ways something of their Creator. In this sense, I think that Deane-Drummond’s criticism is right when she asserts that ascribing the *imago Dei* to non-human creatures, ends up by merely replacing one hierarchical viewpoint of the created order by another. It is not because theology asserts that they are God’s image-bearers that non-human creatures are valued in their difference and specialness. Furthermore when put on a unilinear scale of more or less image-bearing, non-human creatures remain in a disadvantaged position.

Secondly, classic theological language distinguishes between divine image and divine likeness. While the former is reserved only for human beings, the latter is predicated of all creatures. It is true that the notion of likeness is spontaneously somehow thought to be less than the notion of image, and in this sense it may be insufficient to express the particular charism of every creature. Nonetheless, I think that this language is strong enough for founding theologically the inherent value of each creature. The problem is not that the notion of *imago Dei* is restricted to human beings, and therefore theology needs to expand its meaning in order to encompass other creatures. This notion becomes a threat only when it is interpreted in a particular way that disconnects humanity from the rest of creation and affirms a unique and oppressive superiority of humans over other creatures. I think that the notion of likeness not only adequately conveys the creaturely character of each creature – human beings included –

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<sup>138</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, “In God’s Image and Likeness: From Reason to Revelation in Humans and Other Animals,” in *Questioning the Human: Toward a Theological Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Yves De Maeseneer, and Ellen Van Stichel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 61.

but also offers solid ground to recognize and affirm the inherent value of all creatures and their worth. Yet I do agree with Deane-Drummond when she states that “if the language of divine likeness is to carry sufficient weight, then it needs to affect how we interpret divine-image-bearing.”<sup>139</sup> The relevant theological move for dealing with anthropocentric tendencies within Christian doctrine is not to expand the classic understanding of the *imago Dei* in order to encompass other creatures. Rather, what is necessary is to reinterpret this notion so that it carries an ethical component which can illuminate the relation between humanity and other creatures, as well as foster among humans an ecological commitment toward the flourishing of all kinds of life.

Finally, the strategy of enlarging the notion of the *imago Dei* in order to include all creatures, may imply a levelling process that undermines not only a crucial aspect of Christian social tradition such as the dignity of human beings, but also the ground of moral discernment in some ecological issues. I think that it is equally important to confront both the idea of limitless dominion where human beings would enjoy all rights over other creatures, and the egalitarianism that denies any difference among creatures and affirms that all of them have equal value. Inherent or intrinsic value does not mean equal value. Diluting the meaning of the *imago Dei* that theologically founds human dignity within creation is ultimately to weaken a powerful source for ecological commitment. As Denis Edwards states “human beings have a unique moral responsibility for other creatures. There is a unique moral demand made upon them to respond urgently, creatively, and wisely to the ecological crisis they have created.”<sup>140</sup> In this sense, there is no good theological reason to apply the language of God’s image-bearer to

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>140</sup> Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 22.

non-human creatures. The intrinsic value of each creature lies in its intimate bond with the Creator, and it is ensured by the fact that every creature reflects something of the glory of God. The notion of the *imago Dei* must be reinterpreted so that it safeguards and founds the dignity of human beings as well as it entails and promotes the human ethical commitment toward the flourishing of other creatures. Christian life has to be equally committed to the integrity of creation as well as the dignity of the human person.

**b. Human uniqueness**

Ecotheology has also called into question the notion of human uniqueness, namely the idea that human beings are to be set apart from other creatures inasmuch as they are unique. This criticism arises from the ambiguous implications that belief in human specialness involves for creation. In this sense, ecotheology is characterized by the suspicion that an exclusive focus on human uniqueness and interests is at the root of the current ecological challenges. It is undeniable that there has been a tendency in Christian theology to over-emphasize the unique place and role of humanity within the created order. This human supremacy is typically based on the conviction that human beings are fundamentally different from other creatures. The theological expression and support of this human distinctiveness has classically been the notion of the *imago Dei*, namely only humans are God's image-bearers.

Yet, are we truly unique in God's eyes? What would be the theological arguments to ground human distinctiveness? Contemporary scientific investigation seems to blur the limits and the supposed gap between humanity and other creatures. Do claims for human uniqueness hence not fall into the trap of anthropocentrism, which assumes that humanity is in possession of some particular features which set it in a privileged position within creation?

Human uniqueness has been classically related to human dignity. The former sets the bases for the dignity of humanity within creation. Nevertheless, contemporary scientific investigation calls into question this alleged difference between humans and non-human creatures. If such human distinctiveness exists, it can be understood only in terms of an ecological and biological continuity with all other forms of life. From a cosmological, biological, and behavioral point of view, this continuity seems often endorsed. From a theological perspective, it seems that no argument, other than the *imago Dei* notion, can be invoked in order to justify human separatism.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, other voices express that the seeming continuity between humanity and other creatures does not deny the uniqueness of the former.

South African theologian Ernst Conradie, in an acute work that combines theological reflection with scientific data, presents what he believes is already a certain consensus within ecotheology on how human uniqueness should be assessed.<sup>142</sup> He does so under the form of some theses, which he thinks express the double movement of decentering and recentering of the place of humanity within the earth of community proposed by Sally McFague.<sup>143</sup> Conradie asserts, first of all, that the biological and ecological continuity of humanity with the rest of the earth community is stressed in virtually all ecological theologies. In this sense, the distinctiveness of the human species can be understood only in terms of this ecological and biological continuity with all other forms of life. In order to counteract what is seen as the customary tendency of Christian theology to underline the specialness and separateness of

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<sup>141</sup> See, for instance, David Clough, "All God's Creatures: Reading Genesis on Human and Non-Human Animals," in *Reading Genesis after Darwin*, ed. Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145–62.

<sup>142</sup> Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology*, 79–182.

<sup>143</sup> Sallie McFague, "At Home on Earth," in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 99–129.

human beings vis-à-vis the rest of creatures, ecotheology stresses the commonality and similarities between humanity and other animals.

Gregory Peterson shows, for instance, how the distinction between human beings and other creatures has classically been built upon cognitive capacities such as reason, language, consciousness, and self-consciousness. Relying on contemporary scientific data he notes nonetheless that these capabilities can be found in other creatures as well, however in different forms and degrees, and therefore “the claim that there is an absolute cognitive divide is no longer tenable.”<sup>144</sup> Yet, those who contest these similarities and continuity between human and animals argue that what is known in cognitive ethology as the “clever Hans” effect is present in many of the experiments which ascribe certain capacities such as language and reason to animals.<sup>145</sup> Others underline that these are far from full-fledged capabilities in animals, and that they represent not a beginning of what animals may one day develop, but rather the limit or summit of what they are able to achieve.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, such abilities are limited to the rarefied elite of the animal world, and we cannot reasonably expect them to develop in other animals.<sup>147</sup>

Human uniqueness has also been grounded in morality. Yet, as has been shown, some animals such as wolves and dogs exhibit the moral capacity to distinguish between what is

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<sup>144</sup> Gregory R. Peterson, “Alone in the Universe?” in *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>145</sup> The “clever Hans” effect refers to the possibility that the researcher may involuntarily contaminate the result of the experiment through gestures, voice tones, and body language.

<sup>146</sup> Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología Teológica Fundamental*, 5a ed., Presencia Teológica 49 (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1988), 274.

<sup>147</sup> For a philosophical defense of human distinctiveness see, for instance, Paul Valadier, *L'exception humaine* (Paris: CERF, 2011).

wrong and good within their specific social habitats.<sup>148</sup> Here, it is certainly the definition of morality which determines whether or not it can be ascribed to other animals. Others, like J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, point to symbolic reasoning and a certain naturalness of religious imagination as that which characterizes human distinctiveness, which has historically emerged in the interaction of biological and cultural evolution.<sup>149</sup> Still others assert that what is distinctive about humankind is not a matter of the uniqueness of particular physical or cognitive abilities, but that our distinctiveness emerges rather from the dynamic outcome of our embodied interactions as we are embedded within social relationships and human culture, and within the presence of God.<sup>150</sup> In this perspective, unique human characteristics are seen as arising from what emerges in the interaction of various distinctly enhanced, but not unique, cognitive capacities.

In any case, the debate about human uniqueness is not caused by discrepancies in scientific data, but rather by their interpretation as well as the way in which they are valued and combined. What seems clear to me is that we are no longer talking about some kind of absolute difference from all other animals. What we need instead is to make careful distinctions that recognize both similarity and difference. This allows for a better recognition and appraisal of what is specific and proper to each particular species, human beings included.

Secondly, Conradie affirms that in assessing human distinctiveness, the presence of various forms of hierarchy, including hierarchies based on complexity, cannot be denied. In this sense, the recognition of similarities between human beings and other creatures does not imply

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<sup>148</sup> Deane-Drummond, "Are Animals Moral? Taking Soundings through Vice, Virtue, Conscience and *Imago Dei*."

<sup>149</sup> J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, The Gifford Lectures 2004 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>150</sup> Warren Brown, "The Emergence of Human Distinctiveness," in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 109–24.

a flat valuation of the created order. Scholars recognize the importance and necessity of a diversified understanding of value. Denis Edwards, following other authors, proposes for instance the level of consciousness of creatures as a principal criterion of discernment between competing interests of different species of living creatures.<sup>151</sup> He thinks that this criterion may be useful for addressing ecological issues. Nevertheless, it should not be used against human beings, in the way some attempt to affirm the relative value of humanity and discriminate against those who suffer from disabilities or whose consciousness is not fully developed. Indeed, “in the revelation of divine Wisdom in Jesus of Nazareth we are confronted with God’s priority for the poor and disabled.”<sup>152</sup> Edwards is aware that some may consider his theological stance as anthropocentric because of its defense of the uniqueness of humanity. Nevertheless, he argues that he confronts the anthropocentrism that envisages human beings as having limitless rights over other creatures. This last perspective is faithful with neither the Gospel of Jesus nor the loving God that it reveals. Other theologians, such as John Haught, despite their agreement with the ecological critique vis-à-vis the dynamics of dominance and oppression, assert that theology should maintain the notion of hierarchy in its assessment of creatures.<sup>153</sup> First of all, because that from a theological and etymological point of view the word “hierarchy” helps us hold onto the religious conviction that reality has its origin in the sacred. Secondly, because theology needs the term in order to emphasize, against reductionist attempts, that life and mind cannot be reduced without remainder to lifeless matter. Finally, Haught affirms that

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<sup>151</sup> Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 161.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>153</sup> Haught, *God After Darwin*, 73–81, and John Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 41–52.

“hierarchal” thinking is now experiencing a revival even within the world of science, especially through the notion of information.<sup>154</sup>

It is clear that to a certain extent such a moral hierarchy among creatures is already common wisdom. It is true that historical examples of those who have suffered from being on the wrong side of a moral hierarchy, such as ethnic minorities, should incline us to be suspicious about human uniqueness and any kind of hierarchy. Conradie acknowledges that the role of power relationships in any hierarchy cannot be denied. However, he thinks that such a hierarchy also implies a form of dependence. In other words, hierarchy does not necessarily imply domination and oppression. In fact, from an ethical viewpoint it is even helpful to affirm a hierarchy of status and worth among creatures. On the one hand, rightly understood, such a hierarchy promotes the ethical treatment of the vulnerable, and in this sense, it enforces human ecological commitment. It reinforces human accountability for the wellbeing of other creatures. On the other hand, it offers criteria to distinguish between the harm done to creatures of more value from the harm done to creatures of less value. As Michael Camosy points out “caging a self-aware Gorilla for a medical experiment, for instance, might be quite different from caging a mouse for a similar experiment.”<sup>155</sup> I do think therefore that human uniqueness needs to be thought of in terms of our rootedness and relatedness with other creatures. Nonetheless, this commonality between humanity and non-human creatures does not preclude the recognition of a hierarchy of status and value among creatures. Rightly

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<sup>154</sup> As Haught shows: “in the realm of scientific knowledge, the most obvious evidence of the presence of information in nature is found in the way DNA and RNA function in the living cell.” Haught, *God After Darwin*, 75.

<sup>155</sup> Charles Camosy, “Other Animals as Persons? - A Roman Catholic Inquiry,” in *Animals as Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond, Becky Artinian-Kaiser, and David L. Clough (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 275.

understood, such a hierarchy is a source of and not a hindrance to human ecological commitment.

When it comes to theologically founded and expressed human uniqueness, I think that ecotheology needs to both maintain and reinterpret the notion of the *imago Dei*. It would be wrong to consider the worth of other creatures as simply reduced humans, and in this sense, the notion of the *imago Dei* should be reserved to human beings. Non-human creatures share in God's likeness, and they deserve to be valued in their own particularity and specificity. This theological expression of human distinctiveness is meant neither to denigrate other creatures nor to justify human limitless domination over them. Yet, ecotheology needs to reinterpret the *imago Dei* in order to allow it, along with expressing human uniqueness, to voice human responsibility and commitment toward the wellbeing of other creatures. Although crucial and important, natural capacities are not sufficient for defining human uniqueness and image-bearing,<sup>156</sup> and therefore the notion of the *imago Dei* does not refer merely to inherent human capacities. It rather connects humanity at once with God and other creatures, and it is therefore in this perspective that it should be understood.

### **c. The Role of Humanity within Creation**

Human uniqueness is closely related to the question about the role and place of human beings vis-à-vis the rest of creation. How should the relationship between humans and other species be portrayed? Does humanity have a particular task and position, not only *de facto* but also *de iure*, in its interaction with other creatures? What would be the theological arguments

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<sup>156</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's Image and Likeness in Humans and Other Animals: Performative Soul-Making and Graced Nature," *ZYGON* 47, no. 4 (2012): 934–48.

for grounding this mission? It is well known that a wrong interpretation of the mandate of dominion (Gn1:26-28) as domination has historically served as an alibi for exploitative practices. What then would be the images and notions that should characterize the way humanity interplays with the rest of creation?

Ecotheology has put into question the notion of the *imago Dei* for its historical association with the motif of *dominium terrae*. For some, it is precisely by subduing and ruling the earth that humanity embodies God's image. In this sense, the fact that human beings bear the image of God is not just an expression of their distinctiveness, but it also implies a special task vis-à-vis other creatures, which is characterized by the notions of dominion and subduing. On the one hand, ecotheology has been reinterpreting these notions and tempering them with other biblical expressions such as "till" and "guard" which voice humanity's role within creation, and on the other hand, it has been searching for other root images that may rightly portray the role and task of human beings within the created order. Many are the images and notions that have been proposed and explored in this respect, such as caretakers, guardians, priests of creation, earthkeepers, co-creators, and stewards. Each of these images has its strengths and drawbacks, and they emphasize a particular way of depicting the task of humanity in relation to the rest of creatures.

Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, in his Gifford Lectures published as *God in Creation. A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, focuses among many themes on how human beings have to be depicted in their role and presence within creation. He thinks that, first of all, human beings have to be conceived in their relationship and fellowship with creation. They are *imago mundi*, and they can exist only in community with all other created beings and can

understand themselves only in that community. Secondly, human beings have a priestly calling, which means that they stand before God on behalf of creation, and before creation on behalf of God.<sup>157</sup> Moltmann thinks that human beings, as God's image-bearers are involved in three fundamental relationships, "they rule over other earthly creatures as God's representatives and in his name; they are God's counterpart on earth, the counterpart to whom he wants to talk, and who is intended to respond to him; and they are the appearance of God's splendor, and his glory on earth."<sup>158</sup> Humanity is thus God's proxy within creation, and human beings stand before other creatures on God's behalf. Yet, Moltmann insists that this special role of humanity should not be understood as power and dominion. The notion of *imago Dei* is a theological term before it becomes an anthropological one. It says something about God who freely establishes a particular relationship with one of his creatures – the one who happens to be his image – and then, only as a consequence of this, it conveys something about human beings and their relationship to God and other creatures. It is the particular relationship that God engages freely with humanity and becomes constitutive of it. The *imago Dei* sets human beings apart from the rest of creation only secondarily. If the *imago Dei* is conceived as the way God relates to humanity, then that implies for the latter performing a role - counterpart, representative, and appearance – and theology should be able to draw ethical guidelines for human behavior. The way theology depicts the *imago Dei* becomes significant when applied to ethics in the ecological issues we face today. Although Moltmann's approach suggests numerous auspicious paths with this respect, he does not deepen this perspective, and one can wonder what it

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<sup>157</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 190.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 220–21.

means to be God's counterpart, appearance, and representative within creation. This theological stance lacks therefore practical guidelines that may specify the way human beings should embody these tasks.

All the images used to describe the relationship between human beings and other creatures disclose a particular understanding of divine agency, the purpose of creation, and the relationship between humanity and its Creator. Elizabeth Johnson in her most recent book,<sup>159</sup> for instance, offers the following metaphors for portraying the way God relates to creation: a composer of a fugue, a jazz player, a theatrical improviser, a choreographer, a game designer. She thinks that it is not enough to recognize the immanence and presence of God within Creation, but that it is rather crucial to explore the way in which divine agency acts within the created order. In this sense, Johnson characterizes divine agency throughout the book, speaking of the Spirit as the one who calls, empowers, accompanies, and is the dynamic ground. The Spirit invites but never coerces human response. The Spirit prods, pushes, pulls, and lures the heart into loving relationship. If human beings are called to shape their own way of relating to other creatures from the way in which God relates to creation, then the theological understanding of divine agency is decisive for framing the relationship between humanity and non-human creatures.

As mentioned above, the notion of stewardship is especially important inasmuch as it has become the default position among many theologians. Nevertheless, although it has been crucial in linking ecological sensitivity with theological reflection, it has drawbacks as well. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham, for instance, disavows the notions of stewardship and

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<sup>159</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts. Darwin and the God of Love* (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

priesthood for describing the role of humanity vis-à-vis other creatures. He thinks that the view that other creatures are related to God only through human mediation “is surely a relic of some of the more grossly anthropocentric views of the creation in Christian history, and has no support from the Bible, where other creatures have their own direct relationship with God.”<sup>160</sup> This is why humanity is called to embody what Bauckham terms cosmic humility. Human beings join other creatures in their praising of God. This horizontal model of fellow-creatureliness in the praise of God exists in counterpoise to the vertical model of human dominion over other creatures. Bauckham thinks that theology should not fuse these two models. In their interaction they rule out both a sort of deep ecology in which humans abdicate responsibility for the distinctive powers they have been given by God, and the model of human priesthood which deprives the creatures of their own God-given ways of being themselves to the glory of God.<sup>161</sup>

All the images which ecotheology has been exploring to theologically voice the relationship between humanity and other creatures have their strengths and weaknesses. It is therefore clear that there are different ways in which the place and role of humanity within the created order may be understood. These images, as Ernst Conradie states, are not innocent, but they are open to metaphorical innovation and creative usage.<sup>162</sup> In any case, it seems clear what features these images need to fulfill in order to be theologically fruitful. On the one hand, they should portray humanity at once in its relationship with God and other creatures. On the

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<sup>160</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Stewardship in Question,” in *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, Sarum Theological Lectures (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 84. The author relies on some texts such as Gn. 9:10 and 16; Job 38-9; Pss. 50:4; 104:21 and 104:27-8; Isa. 45:8; Joel 1:20; Matt. 6:26; Rev. 5:13.

<sup>161</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>162</sup> Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology*, 217.

other hand, they also need to disclose something about divine agency, and the *telos* toward which the whole of creation is led by God.

In this sense, I believe that the notion of the *imago Dei* should not be put aside or silenced because of its alleged anthropocentric emphasis. It not only helps us in relating humanity to God, but it also offers a meaningful portrayal of the relationship between human beings and other creatures. In the next chapter I propose that, understood as *kenosis*, the notion of *imago Dei* provides a sound and timely theological understanding of the human place and role within creation. Defined as both *making-room* or *self-limitation* and *self-giving* or *self-emptying love*, the notion of *kenosis* discloses something not only about divine agency, but also about crucial aspects of humanity in its interaction with other creatures. In the context of the ecological crisis, the notion of *imago Dei* understood as *kenosis*, can stimulate us in our discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life.

### **III. *Imago Dei* as Kenosis: Self-Limitation and Self-Giving Love**

The previous chapter has established three main points. First, theology has seen the rise of a new field of research labeled ecotheology starting from roughly the second part of the last century. Although it has not provided an original theological method up to now, it has nonetheless organized itself around some distinctive topics, lines of research, and theological strategies. It has evolved through the effort of some authors, publications, and theological journals. Ecotheology has been instrumental in raising theological awareness of ecological challenges which call for a Christian critique of the practices and beliefs underlying the ecological crisis as well as for an ecological reformation of Christianity. The notion of ecology should not be restricted only to its environmental dimension, but its social and personal components have to be acknowledged as well. As a result, ecotheology can collaborate meaningfully in dealing with the ecological crisis. Secondly, ecotheology has brought into question some of the classic assumptions in systematic theology. As to theological anthropology, ecotheology has directed its criticism especially toward the idea of human uniqueness, the notion of human dignity in its relation to other creatures, and the role of humanity within creation. Thirdly, the notion of *imago Dei* has been especially criticized inasmuch as it appears to endorse an anthropocentric worldview which has proved itself detrimental for the life of many species and the flourishing of creation as a whole. Some think that this notion should be silenced or discarded since it cannot be detached from its anthropocentric emphasis. The first chapter has shown that instead of getting rid of the notion of *imago Dei*, ecotheology needs to reinterpret it in order to retrieve and unfold its ecologically friendly overtones.

Accordingly, in this chapter I turn to the interpretation of the symbol of *imago Dei*, understood as a theological motif. I will describe, first of all, three main historical lines of interpretation: essentialist, functionalist, and relational, which can summarize and group the contributions of those who have offered a theological understanding of *imago Dei*. These lines of interpretation will be assessed for their strengths and weaknesses, and it will be affirmed that they need to be combined for a thorough understanding of this notion. Then I propose the notion of *kenosis* as one sound, meaningful and timely interpretation of the *imago Dei* motif in the context of the current ecological crisis. Stemming from a Christological understanding of *imago Dei*, this perspective permits a better connection between the themes of creation and incarnation-redemption. Defined as both *making-room or self-limitation* and *self-giving or self-emptying love*, the notion of *kenosis* will be explored from both biblical and systematic points of view. I will argue that this notion discloses primarily something crucial about God's agency within creation, and only then can it be considered as an anthropological notion which conveys a meaningful and opportune understanding of the *imago Dei*. In doing so, *kenosis* not only connects the three classic interpretations of *imago Dei*, but it also serves as a specifier for them, inasmuch as it provides concrete content and a precise direction for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. Recourse will be made to contemporary exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11, and to authors such as Jürgen Moltmann, Denis Edwards, John Haught and Sarah Coakley, who have explored the themes of *kenosis* and divine agency. Finally, I will also deal with the main critiques which have been addressed to *kenosis* as revelatory of humanity, especially from feminist theology. The chapter provides an understanding of *kenosis* which is

both a meaningful interpretation of *imago Dei* and a key ingredient in the process of a theological re-imagination of humanity within the context of the current ecological crisis.

#### A) Three Approaches to *Imago Dei*: Substantialist, Functionalist, and Relational

It can be said that the *imago Dei* has progressively become a theological motif through the way it has been interpreted and used within theological reflection. A theological motif can be defined as a theological starting point which cannot be refuted – like an axiom – which has wide influence in the development and shaping of other theological frameworks and ideas.<sup>163</sup> It is a cornerstone that stems from revelation and helps in building theological argumentation. In presenting the *imago Dei* as a theological motif, I want to state from the outset that its significance should be reduced neither to its presence in Genesis 1 nor to its appearance in other biblical contexts.<sup>164</sup> Although the biblical roots of this notion are extremely important, I do not aim to offer in this chapter an exegetical understanding of the *imago Dei* in all of its occurrences within the Bible. As a theological motif the meaning and function of the *imago Dei* within theological reflection are currently determined not only by its location in the Scriptures, but also by the history of its interpretation and its various usages in theological argumentation and debates. It plays indeed an important role in different theological domains, sometimes quite independently of what can be considered its accurate interpretation in each of its

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<sup>163</sup> H. Paul Santmire uses the notion of theological motif in a slightly different way: “a theological motif, in other words, is not yet a ‘theological model’ in the contemporary sense of the latter expression because it is not self-consciously chosen, as a model is, as a formative principle for theological reflection. Theological motifs, rather, are presupposed, taken for granted, and employed as a matter of course.” Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 15. According to him Christian tradition has articulated its reflection on nature through basically two theological motifs: the spiritual motif, and the ecological motif.

<sup>164</sup> The explicit biblical references to *imago Dei*, humanity created as the image of God, are: Genesis 1:26-7; 5:1-3; and 9:6; Wisdom 2:23; Sirach 17:3; and 2 Esdras 8:44; 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9.

appearances within the sacred texts. It is, for instance, a key factor in numerous ethical debates such as abortion and euthanasia, in which it voices and affirms human dignity. In this sense, it helps both to oppose any form of domination in the name of differences of gender, race, class and age, and to support the universal validity of human rights. It is not the precise meaning of the *imago Dei* in its biblical occurrences that is at stake in these debates, but rather its expression of biblical faith in the grounding of the equality among human beings. Feminist theology claims along the same lines that the feminine is capable of expressing fully the whole of divinity, for women are both equally created in the image of God and called to be the image of Christ.<sup>165</sup> Thus the fullness of the divine can be expressed through feminine images based on women's experience. In this case, the *imago Dei*, as a theological motif, becomes one of the cornerstones in the task of overcoming the current speech about God which has become oppressive and idolatrous inasmuch as it uses male images exclusively, literally, and patriarchally in portraying God.

### **1. Biblical usage of the *Imago Dei***

Although the idea that humanity has been created in the image of God has always been considered a central affirmation for theological anthropology, it appears only a few times in the Old Testament. Besides Gen 1:26-28, which is the classical source of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, this idea is found again in Gen 5:1-3 and Gen 9:6. The first biblical account of creation presents the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God. Human beings also receive the mandate to act within and upon the created order. These few verses, Gen 1:26-28, are

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<sup>165</sup> See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 8, 15, 62, 69.

certainly the main core of the biblical notion of the *imago Dei*. The Hebrew words that are used in the text are *selem* (image) and *d<sup>e</sup>mût* (likeness), and the verbs associated with the mandate given to humanity of having dominion over the animals and subduing the earth are *radâ* (to rule) and *kabas* (to subdue). It goes without saying that the interpretation of these words and their consequent implications for the understanding of the *imago Dei* has been difficult and controversial among biblical scholars. More will be said later on in this chapter about the meaning of these words and their influence upon the understanding of the idea that humanity has been created in the image of God.

The other two texts in Genesis that contain the words image and likeness are related to the previous one. While Gen 9:6 connects the fact that humanity has been created in the image of God with the reckoning which God will require of human life, Gen 5:1-3 affirms that human beings have been made in the likeness of God and states that Adam at the age of one hundred and thirty years became the father of Seth who is in his likeness and according to his image. It is worth noting that Adam transmits to his progeny the image and likeness he has previously received. The biblical text does not tell us anything about a loss or diminishing of image or likeness no matter the vicissitudes of history. These three occurrences of *selem* and *d<sup>e</sup>mût* are therefore within what is known as the primeval history.

The *imago Dei* appears again in three other texts of the Old Testament: Wisdom 2:23, Sirach 17:3, and 2 Esdras 8:44. Wisdom states that God has made humanity in the image of God's eternity, and links the notion of image to the idea of incorruptibility. Sirach 17:3, in the context of verses 1-4, relates the *imago Dei* to the idea that God has entrusted humanity with dominion or authority over creation. The text of 2 Esdras asks God for mercy based on the idea

that humanity has been created in God's image. God should spare Israel and have mercy upon them, since human beings have been made by God's hands and in God's own image.

The idea that humanity has been created in the image of God appears twice in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9. In this latter case, the Greek words used by the text are *eikon* (image) and *homoiosis* (likeness). 1 Corinthians 11:7 states that men should not have their heads veiled in the assembly, for they are the image and reflection of God, while women ought to have their heads veiled since they are the reflection of men. Despite the misogynist flavor that this text conveys at first sight, it should not be understood as denying that women have been equally created in the image of God. This would be a misinterpretation. The same text goes on to affirm that in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman, for just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. The text can be seen therefore as an assertion that in the Lord there is mutuality and reciprocity between woman and man. Furthermore, the idea that women have not been created in the image of God has little support throughout tradition, and when this text is presented as a proof of this alleged difference between man and woman, it is usually based on a misreading of St. Paul.<sup>166</sup> James 3:9 contains the single use of *homoiosis* in the New Testament, and asserts that human beings should not be cursed by anyone, inasmuch as they have been made in the likeness of God.

The *imago Dei* is present in other texts of the New Testament but now not as an affirmation that humanity has been created in the image of God. Two passages state that Jesus Christ is the image of God: 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15. While the former points out

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<sup>166</sup> See, for instance, Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man: Is Woman Included?," *The Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 3/4 (July 1, 1979): 175–206.

that the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers preventing them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, the latter links Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God with the origin and reconciliation of all creation. Saint Paul seems to make reference in these two texts to something that was well known in the teaching of the apostolic communities.<sup>167</sup>

Other texts emphasize the renewal of the image of God among those who believe in Jesus Christ: 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:22-4, and Colossians 3:10. The text of the second letter to the Corinthians indicates that when we turn to the Lord the veil of our sight is removed, and with unveiled faces we see that we are being transformed by the Spirit into the image of God. Ephesians emphasizes the difference between the way Gentiles live their lives, and the way those who believe in Jesus Christ are called to embody their existence. Believers are called to put away their former way of life – their old self – and to be renewed in the spirit of their minds clothing themselves with the new self, which is created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Along the same lines, the passage from Colossians invites believers to get rid of things that pertain to their former way of life such as anger, wrath, malice, and slander. Abandoning this old self and its practices, believers have clothed themselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. This renewal implies that the former differences and inequalities are abolished and are no longer valid among believers, since Christ is all and in all.

Finally, two texts conflate the ideas of Jesus Christ as the image of God and the renewal or conformation of the image among believers: Romans 8:29 and 1 Corinthians 15:49. The text

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<sup>167</sup> See Adalbert Gauthier Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles* (Paris: Desclée, 1987), 32.

from Romans asserts that God predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son those whom he foreknew, in order that Jesus Christ might be the firstborn within a large family. Humanity is therefore being conformed to the image of the Son. The passage from 1 Corinthians – inserted in a long reflection about resurrection which includes a parallel between Adam and Jesus Christ – affirms that just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. This will not happen until the general resurrection at the *eschaton*.

Some general conclusions can be drawn from all the occurrences of the *imago Dei* in the Bible. The first one is that these biblical passages do not know or convey anything about a loss or diminishing of the image. There is indeed consensus nowadays among scholars that the idea of a loss or deformation of the image of God in humanity is foreign to the Bible.<sup>168</sup> Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament explicitly displays this perspective. It is worth noting this silence, especially given the importance that the idea of deformation or loss of the image in humanity has had in the theological understanding of salvation, grace, human capabilities, and the role it has played within the theological debate among Christian denominations. The second conclusion is that there are different usages of this notion, and the understanding of these different usages should not be forced in order to fit into just one main perspective or narrative. In this sense, it cannot be said, for instance, that the meaning and interpretation of the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 can be equated with the appearance of this notion in Colossians. As previously shown, the Bible contains three different types of references to the *imago Dei*: humanity is described as created or made in the image and likeness of God, Jesus Christ is described as the

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<sup>168</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 148.

image of God, and Saint Paul also speaks about the renewal in the image of Christ in those who believe in him. In his most recent book, David Kelsey states, for instance, that the diversity within the biblical usage of the *imago Dei* does not allow for a unique pattern of interpretation. According to him, there are three distinct and intertwined biblical narratives of how God relates to all that is not God: God creates, draws all things to their eschatological consummation, and reconciles everything to Himself. These three narratives are exemplified and expressed through the array of occurrences of the *imago Dei* within the Scriptures and this is why the different biblical usages of this notion cannot be subsumed into one pattern of interpretation.<sup>169</sup> Accordingly, whereas the Old Testament references to the *imago Dei* point to the idea that human beings are made in God's image and likeness, the New Testament introduces the idea that the *imago Dei* is in some sense given or renewed through Christ – who is the Image of God – either in the present or eschatologically. As a result, as Spanish theologian Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña asserts, human destiny is no longer to be God's image, but rather the image of Christ. Or better, the only way through which human beings can be the image of God is by becoming themselves the image of Christ, who is the image of God:<sup>170</sup> "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). This Christological accent in the interpretation of the *imago Dei* will be further explored later on in this chapter. The final conclusion that can be drawn from the usages of the *imago Dei* within the Bible is the dynamic dimension of the image within human beings which is oriented toward its

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<sup>169</sup> See David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 915.

<sup>170</sup> See Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología Teológica Fundamental*, 79.

eschatological fulfillment. On the one hand, it is said that humanity is already created in the image of God, which emphasizes the actual and present character of the image. On the other hand, Saint Paul underlines the dynamic character of the *imago Dei*, in which we are being renewed or transformed. Therefore, the image of God in man is not something static, given once and for all; it is rather a dynamic reality, whose progressive imprinting is taking place in the interpersonal relationship of the Christian with Christ.<sup>171</sup> It is worth noting that this perspective also introduces a moral component within the image, which will be influential in the history of its interpretation: “do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9-10).

## **2. Historical Survey of the Interpretation of the *Imago Dei***

Having recalled all the occurrences of the *imago Dei* within the Bible, their different nuances, and having drawn some general conclusions, I turn now to the history of the interpretation of the *imago Dei* throughout Christian tradition. My main purpose is not to give an exhaustive account of each one of the interpretations offered by each one of the key historical figures, but rather to delineate the main lines of interpretation which can be identified within this panoramic view. The focus of this overview is, therefore, not the details of specific interpretations, but rather the main constant features and the principal questions which have been crucial for advancing and deepening the interpretation of the *imago Dei*. Given that Christian tradition has always considered Genesis 1:26-28 as the *locus classicus* of the notion of the *imago Dei*, I will focus, henceforth, on the history of the interpretation of

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<sup>171</sup> See Ibid.

these verses insofar as they seemingly offer the meaning of the theological assertion that humanity has been made in the image and likeness of God. I will first go through the interpretation of this text within the first five centuries of Christian history, inasmuch as it is within this time span that some main constant traits of the interpretation of the *imago Dei* have been established, which will remain almost invariable till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, after presenting the interpretation of Saint Thomas and how the theological controversies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century affected the understanding of the *imago Dei*, I will focus on the last century which has been the scenario of acute debates and remarkable studies about the interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 led by Old Testament scholars.

Many studies nowadays offer a thorough account of the historical interpretation of the *imago Dei*.<sup>172</sup> They all agree on the fact that the exegetical options of the Fathers, the philosophical influences they have, and the theological controversies of their time, such as Gnosticism, Arianism, and Pelagianism, had a great impact on their understanding of the idea of human beings created in the image and likeness of God. They all also point to Irenaeus as the one who has first developed a more systematic approach to the notions of image and likeness.<sup>173</sup> His interpretation of these verses of Genesis 1 is directly related to his argument with the Gnostics. Irenaeus assumes some lines of interpretation which will be influential for

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<sup>172</sup> See, for instance, Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 33–65; Luis F. Ladaria, “L'homme créé à l'image de Dieu,” in *Histoire des dogmes, tome 2 : L'Homme et son Salut*, ed. Bernard Sesboüé (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 89–147; Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*; G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Man: The Image of God* (Eerdmans, 1962), 67–119; David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, Revised edition (London: Collins, 1973).

<sup>173</sup> Gerald Bray asserts that some key ideas which will be later developed within Christian tradition are already present in the interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 made by rabbis in the intertestamental period. These ideas concern the interpretation of the plural in verse 26, the idea of a loss or diminishing of the image after the fall, the link between the image and the dominion over creation, and the idea that the image is that which enables humanity to achieve a closer union with God. Gerald Bray, “The Significance of God's Image in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (November 1991): 195–225.

Christian tradition from that point on. First of all, against the background of Gnostic dualism, he asserts that the whole human is created in the image and likeness of God. There can be neither body without soul, nor soul without body; the two of them appear and disappear together. This anthropological stance, which strongly unites the material and non-material components of humanity, has a great impact on Irenaeus's understanding of the *imago Dei*. The body is the essential expression of immaterial reality. In this sense, for Irenaeus, if the image is not related to what is visible and can be perceived by the senses, the word loses its meaning, the image cannot be disclosed and the Incarnation is no longer conceivable.<sup>174</sup> It is the whole of what humans are, and not just some parts of them, which has been created in the image and likeness of God. Secondly, Irenaeus introduces, especially in the fifth book of his *Adversus Haereses*, the distinction between image and likeness.<sup>175</sup> Although it will not be followed by all the writers of the first five centuries – St. Augustine, for instance, does not adhere to it – it is undeniable that this distinction has greatly influenced the Christian understanding of the *imago Dei*, especially within Catholic tradition. Considered as a significant development of the biblical account of the *imago Dei*,<sup>176</sup> there is consensus among scholars today that this distinction is not present in the text of Genesis.<sup>177</sup> At any rate, by distinguishing between image and likeness, Irenaeus wants to describe, on the one hand, that which has been given to humanity through creation and belongs to its constitution (the image), and, on the other hand, that which is progressively

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<sup>174</sup> Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*, 67.

<sup>175</sup> Adv. Hae. V,6,1; V,8,1; V,16,2.

<sup>176</sup> International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," 2004, n. 15,  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040723\\_communion-stewardship\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html).

<sup>177</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 148–49.

imprinted in humanity by the Spirit (the likeness). He wants to underline the interdependence of what human beings are and what they need to become; the interdependence of what is already given to them and what needs to be acquired and will be the fruit of action and progress.<sup>178</sup> According to Irenaeus human beings have lost the likeness through sin, while the image is never lost. By his incarnation, Jesus has revealed the perfect image of God and restored the likeness within humanity. The latter is progressively engraved by the work of the Spirit, who is the other hand of the Father and shapes humanity on the model of the Son.<sup>179</sup> Finally, according to Irenaeus, liberty is *par excellence* the expression of God's image within humanity. It can be certainly affected, but never cancelled by human infidelity. As everything created, human liberty is under the law of progression, which means that it is in the process of becoming, and is able to either grow and develop or become stunted, unfree.<sup>180</sup> This is why Irenaeus asserts that it has been liberated by Jesus Christ, who has established new conditions for stabilizing and enhancing the exercise of human liberty. Against the background of the determinism predicated by Gnostics and Stoics, Irenaeus affirms the gift of liberty granted to human beings, which is the highest manifestation of God's image within them. Although incomplete in its image and likeness, humanity moves, led by the Spirit, toward its completion or perfection.

The Alexandrian Fathers – Clement, Athanasius, Origen, and Cyril – offered an understanding of the *imago Dei* which differs from the one proposed by Irenaeus. The distinctive cultural milieu of Alexandria – crossroads between the Hellenic world, Judaism and

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<sup>178</sup> Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*, 310.

<sup>179</sup> Ladaria, "L'homme créé à l'image de Dieu," 97.

<sup>180</sup> Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*, 74.

rising Christianity – and the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the first centuries have a real impact on the emphases and choices they make for interpreting the creation of humanity in God’s image and likeness. Three features of this line of interpretation are worth highlighting. First, it can be said that the Greek conception of the human being as composed of soul and body, even with appropriate modifications, is assumed by the Alexandrian Fathers as the starting point of their anthropologies. As a result of this, and influenced by Philo of Alexandria, they locate God’s image in the soul (*nous*) of human beings. Although this does not imply that they denigrate or despise the human body, it is undeniable that they see the human soul (*nous*) as the most valuable element within the person.<sup>181</sup> The rationale that underlies this association between soul and image is that only a spiritual reality can image the transcendent nature of a spiritual God. This perspective moves away from the biblical vision which identifies the image with the entire human being. Secondly, the Alexandrian Fathers hold that the notion of image applies above all to the Word, the Son. As a result, the theme of the image is shifted from its former natural location in theological anthropology toward the Trinitarian debate. Humanity is now seen, not as the image of God, but rather as created in the image of God or as the image of the Image, for only the Word - the Son - is the Image of God.<sup>182</sup> Finally, as already mentioned, the distinction between likeness and image is not followed by all the writers related to the Alexandrian school. While Clement and Origen maintain it, Athanasius and Cyril do not make reference to this distinction. However, although they do not concur with this

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<sup>181</sup> The Antiochene Fathers – Theodore, Diodore, Chrysostom, and Theodoret – in contrast, include the body as essential within the notion of ‘image.’ See Frederick G. McLeod, “The Antiochene Tradition Regarding the Role of the Body within the ‘Image of God,’” in *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body*, ed. Maureen A. Tilley and Susan A. Ross (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1995), 23–53, and *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, D.C: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1999).

<sup>182</sup> Hamman, *L’homme Image de Dieu. Essai D’une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l’Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*, 312.

differentiation, they all assert, in their interpretation of the pair image-likeness, that there is something which is given to humanity as part of its constitution, and something which needs to be progressively received through the work of the Son or the Spirit. Origen, for instance, explains this polarity between the "already" and the "not yet" along the same lines as Irenaeus. For him human beings have received the dignity of the image by creation, while the perfection of the likeness is reserved to the time of consummation.<sup>183</sup>

The historical influence of Augustine's interpretation of the *imago Dei* cannot be underestimated. With Augustine theological reflection about humanity becomes central for Christian tradition. His quarrel with Pelagianism and his theological understanding of the Trinity had a great impact on the way he portrays God's image and likeness within humanity. Augustine relates the *imago Dei* to the knowledge of God. Human beings are ultimately in the image of God because they have been given the capacity to know God.<sup>184</sup> In this sense and in tune with the previous tradition, Augustine locates the *imago Dei* in the human, rational soul. It is especially in the second part of the *De Trinitate* where the bishop of Hippo thoroughly develops his understanding of the image which he does not distinguish or separate from the likeness. Indeed, both of them – image and likeness – develop or deteriorate together.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, since the capacity to know God never disappears in human beings, no matter their historical circumstances, the image can certainly be distorted or darkened, but it cannot be destroyed or dissolved. Far away enough from the Christological debates, Augustine does not build his theology of the image upon the Word, the Son. According to him, human beings are

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<sup>183</sup> Ladaria, "L'homme créé à l'image de Dieu," 105.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>185</sup> Hamman, *L'homme Image de Dieu. Essai D'une Anthropologie Chrétienne Dans l'Église Des Cinq Premiers Siècles*, 257.

the image of a God who is Trinity. As a result, he aims to identify ultimately in the human soul the presence of a trinity, which is the expression within human beings of the fact that they have been created in the image and likeness of a triune God. Augustine finds this trinity especially in the triad of *memoria*, *intelligentia* and *voluntas*, which are equals and intimately connected among themselves.<sup>186</sup> Human beings are created in the image of God inasmuch as they have been granted the capacity to remember, understand, and love their Creator. Augustine is therefore the first thinker to define the image as a power.<sup>187</sup> This capacity has been distorted or darkened by sin, and it has been restored by Christ. The renovation of the image within each person is therefore the work of God's grace, and is accomplished through baptism and a spiritual growth achieved by daily work. Augustine manages to combine both the ontological and the dynamic or historical character of the image within humanity. This image will be perfect in human beings only when they will be granted an incorruptible body through their resurrection and will perfectly contemplate God.

Saint Thomas takes up the Augustinian understanding of the *imago Dei*, adding some nuances. According to him, all that has been created reflects the image of the Creator to a certain degree. In this sense, Saint Thomas affirms that all creatures are like God inasmuch as they exist and live, however the image of God is to be found only in human beings who are intellectual creatures.<sup>188</sup> He distinguishes accordingly between what he calls likeness by way of a trace, which is present in all creatures, and likeness of image which is present only in rational

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<sup>186</sup> See, for instance, *De Trinitate XIV,6,8; XV,3,5; XV,20,39*.

<sup>187</sup> Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 107.

<sup>188</sup> See *Summa Theologica I,93,2*.

beings.<sup>189</sup> Consequently, although Saint Thomas constantly insists on affirming the unity of soul and body – the former is the substantial form of the latter – he thinks that human beings are in the image of God only with respect to their rational soul. As we have already seen in Augustine and the Alexandrian tradition, Saint Thomas also accords primacy to the soul over the body as the manifestation of God's image in humanity. It is because they are rational beings that humans are in the image of God. Therefore, following Augustine, Saint Thomas relates the *imago Dei* to the power granted to humanity of knowing and loving God. He asserts that the image of God is in humanity in three different ways.<sup>190</sup> First, inasmuch as human beings possess a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God. Secondly, inasmuch as human beings actually or habitually know and love God, though imperfectly. Thirdly, inasmuch as human beings know and love God perfectly. In Saint Thomas, therefore, the *imago Dei* possesses an historical and progressive character since it goes through three stages, namely, the *imago creationis (naturae)*, the *imago recreationis (gratiae)*, and the *imago similitudinis (gloriae)*.<sup>191</sup> As he states, the first image is present in all humans, the second only in the just, and the third only in the blessed. Some think that while the first image is Aquinas's account of the Old Testament image, the second describes the New Testament image in process of formation, and the third describes it in full and perfect activity.<sup>192</sup> It is worth noticing the dynamic character of the image in this understanding, and the distinction that Saint Thomas makes between a general power or endowment present in all human beings (*imago creationis*), and the actual exercise of this power assisted and perfected by God's grace (*imago re-creationis and similitudinis*). It is worth

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<sup>189</sup> I,93,6.

<sup>190</sup> I,93,4.

<sup>191</sup> International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," n. 16.

<sup>192</sup> See, for instance, Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 121.

noticing as well that the Christological definition of the *imago Dei*, which was important in other times, has almost disappeared by the time of Saint Thomas. This forgetfulness is perhaps due to the effort at that time to understand human nature in itself.<sup>193</sup>

The theological controversies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century broke what was a seemingly peaceful consensus, though with some differences and particular emphases, in the interpretation of the *imago Dei*. Luther and Calvin parted company with all those who had previously interpreted the image as some inherent human quality granted by God. Reformers believed that it was mistaken to identify the image with the human power of knowledge and will, and that this association both jeopardized their own deep belief that salvation comes through faith and grace alone, and misconstrues the biblical account of the *imago Dei*.<sup>194</sup> According to the International Theological Commission, the Reformers “accused the Catholics of reducing the image of God to an ‘*imago naturae*’ which presented a static conception of human nature and encouraged the sinner to constitute himself before God.”<sup>195</sup> Unlike the previous tradition, Luther and Calvin proposed an understanding of the *imago Dei* that stresses its relational character. In this sense, as Douglas Hall asserts, they basically conceive the “*imago* as an inclination or proclivity occurring within the relationship” between the Creator and the creature.<sup>196</sup> Human beings are not said to be in the image of God because they possess some

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<sup>193</sup> Ladaria, “L’homme créé à l’image de Dieu,” 133–34.

<sup>194</sup> P.E. Hughes, for instance, asserts that this association combined with the distinction between image and likeness – the former remains while the latter is lost after the fall – is a distinctive component of what he considers the semi-pelagian anthropology of Roman Catholicism. See Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *True Image: Christ as the Origin and Destiny of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 9. David Cairns and Anthony Hoekema are also concerned about the dangerous implications for soteriology that the classic interpretation of the *imago Dei*, epitomized for instance in Aquinas’ understanding, implies. See Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 121–6, and Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 41–42.

<sup>195</sup> International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” n. 17.

<sup>196</sup> Douglas J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2004), 98.

distinctive capacities, but rather they image God inasmuch as they remain faithful to the loving relationship which God has engaged with them. Only in this way are they able to mirror God's image in themselves. This is the main reason why the Reformers, dismissing the distinction of image and likeness, speak of a loss of the image after the fall. In asserting the loss of the image, Luther and Calvin, therefore, do not intend to claim that human sin has implied the loss of any human capacity such as reason or will, although they have been certainly affected. They rather point to the breakdown or violation of the relationship between humanity and its Creator. Because the relationship is broken, human beings are unable to image God. According to them, we no longer image God, "not because we have lost some inherent quality of our creaturehood but because we are literally *disoriented*."<sup>197</sup> As can be expected, Catholics accused the Reformers, therefore, of denying the ontological reality of the image of God and reducing it to a pure relation.<sup>198</sup> The *imago Dei* is restored only by the Word of God and the work of the Spirit, and this process of restoration, which is progressive, requires from humanity only faith and obedience.

It is worth noting that with the Reformers a new line of interpretation of the *imago Dei* takes shape. Before them, as already shown, tradition has classically understood that human beings are created in the image of God inasmuch as they have been granted some capacities – especially related to their rational soul – which distinguish them from the rest of creatures and enable them, through the help of God's grace, to know and love God. These two distinctive approaches to the meaning of humanity created in the image and likeness of God would remain

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>198</sup> International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," n. 17.

virtually untouched till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Old Testament scholars, using new exegetical tools, will turn their attention to the interpretation of the *imago Dei*.

The renewal of OT studies over the last century has greatly influenced the interpretation of the *imago Dei*.<sup>199</sup> It can be said that the different approaches to Gen 1:26-8 are related to three main aspects: a) linguistic study of words (the Hebrew words for image and likeness, and the Hebrew verbs usually translated as “have dominion” and “subdue”), b) the theology of P, who is unanimously considered the writer of Genesis 1, and the dating of the text within the formation span of the OT; c) the linking of the OT with other writings, cultures, and contemporary religions – especially Ancient Near Eastern ones – which may have directly or indirectly influenced its theology and writing. The combination of these three elements as well as the importance and priority given to each one of them by each scholar have produced the large array of understandings of the *imago Dei* which has appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the diversity of interpretations, it can be asserted that a wide consensus has been reached among OT scholars in the last forty years about the understanding of the *imago Dei*.<sup>200</sup> This consensus holds that this notion should be interpreted in a functionalist way, namely, human beings have been created as the image of God within creation. They are God’s representatives on earth, and hence participate in God’s dominion over the rest of creatures.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> As to the history and variations within the interpretation of the *imago Dei* over the last century see: Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Lund, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988); J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 147–77.

<sup>200</sup> See Jónsson, *The Image of God*, 219; and, Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 29.

<sup>201</sup> It should be noted that this functionalist interpretation of the *imago Dei* has two important dissenters among Old Testament scholars: Claus Westermann and James Barr. While the former holds to a modified Barthian interpretation which is relational and can be traced to the interpretation offered by Luther and Calvin, the latter claims that Genesis does not intend to specify the content of the image and neither should we. See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 155–8; and, James Barr, “The Image of God in Genesis: Some Linguistic and Historical Considerations,” in *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, ed. John Barton, vol. II Biblical

This interpretation takes especially into account the ancient Near Eastern background of the notion of *imago Dei*. In this sense, it recognizes the influence that the usage of this notion in other cultures and contemporary religions, in which the royal authorities are said to be in God's image, may have had in the Genesis account of the creation of humanity. As a result, the Genesis use of the *imago Dei* is inspired by the use of the royal imagery in ancient Near Eastern cultures, and it means that humanity represents God within creation and participates in God's dominion over other creatures.

This consensus is also based on other points of agreement in the study of Genesis 1:26-8. First, the *imago Dei* cannot be restricted only to spiritual human capacities or to the physical form of human beings. This text does not support any distinction or separation between spiritual and material components in the creation of humanity. The *imago Dei* refers therefore to the whole person, not just to its corporeal or spiritual side.<sup>202</sup> Clearly this has not always been recognized and affirmed. Greek understandings of humanity have greatly influenced the historical interpretation of the *imago Dei* with its consequent prioritization of the human rational soul as the expression of the image in human beings. Secondly, the philological study of the Hebrew words for image and likeness is not enough for defining the meaning of the text. There is consensus that neither *selem* nor *d'mût* are univocal. Moreover, the idea that they

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Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64–5, and, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis: A Study of Terminology,” in *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr: Volume II: Biblical Studies*, ed. John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67–68.

<sup>202</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 150. The document of the International Theological Commission strongly endorses that the *imago Dei* refers to the whole person: “(...) the whole of man is seen as created in the image of God (...) Avoiding both monism and dualism, the Bible presents a vision of the human being in which the spiritual is understood to be a dimension together with the physical, social and historical dimensions of man”; “this truth has not always received the attention it deserves. Present-day theology is striving to overcome the influence of dualistic anthropologies that locate the *imago Dei* exclusively with reference to the spiritual aspect of human nature”, International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” n. 9 and 27 respectively.

refer to two different realities, and so therefore a distinction can be made between the image and the likeness is not clearly supported by the biblical text.<sup>203</sup> The usual understanding is that the word *dēmūt* qualifies *selem* in order to define and limit its meaning.<sup>204</sup> Finally, although the verbs used by Genesis to express the divine mandate of having dominion or ruling (*rada*) over living creatures and subduing (*kabas*) the earth have an undeniably harsh connotation they cannot be understood as a license for limitless exploitation and domination over other creatures. While *kabas* usually refers to the defeat or conquest of enemies and their enslavement, *rada* is frequently associated with the political power that either kings exercise upon their peoples or one nation upon another one. Despite the harshness that these verbs may convey, biblical scholars agree on asserting that they should not be understood as granting humanity unlimited power over other creatures or as promoting destructive practices toward the earth.<sup>205</sup> The rationale is that the mandate of having dominion over living creatures and subduing the earth should not be separated from the notion of the *imago Dei*. As the International Theological Commission asserts, in tune with the standard interpretation of these verses, human beings exercise this sovereignty over visible creation only in virtue of the privilege conferred upon them by God. They imitate the divine rule, but they cannot displace it.<sup>206</sup> As created in the image of God, humanity participates in the divine rule over creation,

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<sup>203</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 148–49. In fact, as mentioned, the document of the International Theological Commission asserts that the distinction between image and likeness is a significant development of the biblical account introduced by Irenaeus.

<sup>204</sup> See, for instance, Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis: A Study of Terminology," 76; and, Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 46.

<sup>205</sup> Some believe that the anthropocentric character of this text and the destructive message that it conveys cannot be tempered. Norman Habel, for instance, thinks that this is a "grey text" - in contrast with other OT "green texts" - that has been superseded by Jesus' way and message. The mandate to dominate and subdue is no longer valid. See Norman C. Habel, *An Inconvenient Text* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), 74–77.

<sup>206</sup> International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," n. 60.

which is not only the source of its own agency but also its inspiration and model. In this sense, some have explored other biblical narratives and images which stress the sense of community, solidarity, and care that humanity must have vis-à-vis the rest of creatures.<sup>207</sup> It is undeniable that Gen 1:26-8 conveys a hierarchical view of creatures locating humanity in a distinctive position. Nevertheless, it does so within a primal message of solidarity and community among all creatures, epitomized especially in the sharing of vegetarian food.<sup>208</sup> Consequently, having dominion and subduing must be understood in the direction of care, respect, and responsibility that humanity needs to exercise toward other creatures.<sup>209</sup>

### **3. Three lines of interpretation: substantialist, relational, and functionalist**

Having completed this brief overview of the historical interpretation of Gen 1:26-8, as the *locus classicus* of the *imago Dei*, it can be established therefore that the contributions to its interpretation can be grouped into three main perspectives: substantialist/essentialist, functionalist, and relational.<sup>210</sup> This is not to say that these distinctive lines of understanding should be seen as watertight compartments. In fact, elements of the three can be found in

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<sup>207</sup> See, for instance, Bauckham, "Stewardship in Question."; and, *Living with Other Creatures*.

<sup>208</sup> See, for instance, Michael Welker, "Creation, the Image of God, and the Mandate of Dominion," in *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 60–73.

<sup>209</sup> See, for instance, the work of the Belgian exegete André Wénin who asserts that human dominion over other creatures must be oriented toward the life and flourishing of the latter, not only because the mandate of having dominion is preceded by a blessing which aims at the flourishing of life, but also because humanity is called to control its power (*maîtrise maîtrisée*), inasmuch as it is called to exercise the latter as God does, who also sets a limit to God's power when resting the seventh day. See André Wénin, *L'homme biblique : Anthropologie et éthique dans le premier Testament* (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 29–43. He also asserts that Genesis points not only to an exterior dominion, but also and primarily to the dominion that human beings must exercise toward themselves. See André Wénin, *La Bible ou la Violence Surmontée* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2008), 61–116.

<sup>210</sup> See, among many others, Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 15–43; Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 82–93; Hall, *Imaging God*; and, F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 217–40.

many of the authors of this historical survey. I aim simply to identify the particular emphasis and theological rationale of each approach. They also have specific advantages and drawbacks.

A substantialist or essentialist view of the *imago Dei* is one in which some permanent aspect, quality or attribute of humanity is considered to be that which makes the human species unique and special in God's eyes. This can be rationality, freedom, self-consciousness, language, or any other characteristic of the human condition that is seen to distinguish absolutely human beings from the rest of creatures, and seen as the expression of the image within humanity. As mentioned, most of the church Fathers proposed a substantialist understanding of the *imago Dei* inasmuch as they asserted the primacy of the rational soul over the body, and the location of the image in the spiritual capacities of human beings. Saint Thomas also belongs to this line of interpretation as he asserts that the *imago Dei* refers to the human capacity to know and love God. Usually, the special characteristics of humanity said to be the manifestation of the image of God in human beings are qualities that were highly valued in the societies to which the writers making those claims belonged.<sup>211</sup>

As expected, many critiques have been raised against the substantialist or essentialist interpretation of the *imago Dei*. On theological grounds, it is clear that this interpretation does not comport well with the biblical vision of humanity, which does not separate the spiritual from the corporeal, or prioritize the former at the expense of the latter. Dualism and hierarchy between the spiritual and the corporeal is foreign to the OT. As history has shown, this reductionism affects not only the theological appraisal of the body but it also implies an

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<sup>211</sup> See, for instance, two contemporary articles supporting the substantialist understanding of the *imago Dei*: Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Imago Dei and Human Rationality," *ZYGON* 49, no. 1 (2014): 121–34, and, Aky Visala, "Imago Dei, Dualism, and Evolution: A Philosophical Defense of the Structural Image of God," *ZYGON* 49, no. 1 (2014): 101–20.

overestimation of some human capacities. As a result, some human beings – those who excel in these capacities – may be regarded as being better representatives of the divine image within humanity, and others – either with impaired capacities or without some of these capacities – may be regarded as being not fully in God's image. It is well known that eugenic practices, historical mass killings, and many more subtle ways of discrimination stem from distinctive forms of negating or failing to recognize full humanity in others.

A relational interpretation of *imago Dei* is one in which the image is understood in terms of the relationship between humanity and God. In this sense, the image of God does not reside in a particular human attribute, capacity, or human quality, but is a manifestation of a particular relationship between God and humanity.<sup>212</sup> The *imago Dei* is something that occurs in humanity as a result of this relationship. Douglas Hall asserts that humanity “images (used as verb) its Creator because and insofar as it is ‘turned toward’ God. To be *imago Dei* does not mean to have something but to be and do something: to image God.”<sup>213</sup> As mentioned, the relational interpretation finds its best exponents in Luther and Calvin who emphasized this new approach to the *imago Dei* throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Two recent important advocates of a relational interpretation, each with distinctive nuances, are Karl Barth and Claus Westermann from a systematic and a biblical perspective, respectively. Within a relational interpretation, it can be asserted that the *imago Dei* is a theological term before it becomes an anthropological one. It says something about God who freely establishes a particular relationship with one of his creatures – the one who actually happens to be in God's image – and then, only as a consequence of this, it conveys something about human beings and their relationship to God

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<sup>212</sup> Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology*, 88.

<sup>213</sup> Hall, *Imaging God*, 98.

and other creatures.<sup>214</sup> A relational understanding of *imago Dei* may be developed further in a number of ways. The most common has been to explore the intra-Trinitarian mode of relationship as the paradigm of humanity. If God is to be understood as persons-in-mutual-relationship, then human beings, made in the image of the triune God, are to be understood as persons-in-mutual-relationship. Therefore, communion rather than substance is the basic structure of reality.<sup>215</sup> Nevertheless, while some remain skeptical about the idea of grounding theological anthropology in a distinctive understanding of the intra-trinitarian relationships, others highlight that the emphasis on relatedness does not qualify in any sense the nature of relationship. Reflection about the intra-trinitarian relationships supposes that we have some direct access to this knowledge, and that it can be used to model human relationships. It certainly seems more adequate to be cautious in speculation about intra-trinitarian life. Moreover, it is true that relational interpretation of the *imago Dei* requires a specification of the nature of the relationship between humanity and God. Relations can span a large array of types, and they can even be oppressive.

Finally, a functionalist view of *imago Dei* bases its interpretation on the close connection of the themes of “being created in the image of God” and “have dominion and subdue the earth” in Genesis 1. In this sense, this approach emphasizes the special task and role of human beings vis-à-vis the rest of creatures. Humanity acts as a representative of God on the earth inasmuch as it is invited to be part of God’s power and rule over the earth. This interpretation of Genesis 1, which is also called the royal interpretation, as mentioned, is the one that OT

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<sup>214</sup> See, for instance, Moltmann, *God in Creation*, chapter IX.

<sup>215</sup> See, among others, Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*.

biblical scholars tend to support. Human beings rule over other earthly creatures as God's representatives and in God's name. In this sense, the *imago Dei* implies for humanity a particular vocation and commission. Ernst Conradie, for example, holds that "the resemblance between God and humanity is not primarily one of character or substance, but one of function and position."<sup>216</sup> As mentioned, this participation in God's rule over creation does not imply a limitless dominion. One of the risks of this approach is to reduce the image in humanity to a mere task or vocation, emptying it of its ontological reality.<sup>217</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

It is important to note that these three lines of interpretation of the *imago Dei*: substantialist, relational, and functionalist, are far from being mutually exclusive as someone might expect. On the contrary, they complement each other, enabling theology to spell out three distinctive aspects of what this theological motif connotes. Thus, it would be a mistake to believe that the survey of the history of the interpretation of this notion implies that just one of these three understandings is correct and the other two are wrong, and that we need to decide which one is which. What I hope the survey has shown is that cultural and theological contexts have elicited new understandings of the *imago Dei* throughout history, which have been instrumental in deepening our understanding of what being created in the image of God means for humanity. The complementary character of these three interpretations of the *imago Dei* is also asserted in the document of the International Theological Commission already mentioned.

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<sup>216</sup> Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology*, 88.

<sup>217</sup> The International Theological Commission is especially emphatic in pointing to this risk of reductionism (n. 9) and affirming the ontological character of the image (n. 3). Nevertheless, it does affirm that one of the manifestations of the *imago Dei* within humanity is the specific call it has received from God to responsible stewardship of the created world (n. 4, 26, 57-61, 95). International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God."

Beginning with its title – *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* – this document not only explores and affirms what is valuable in each one of these interpretations but also connects them tightly. It also shows their risks and weaknesses.

Accordingly, a substantialist approach highlights the ontological force of the symbol *imago Dei*. In this sense, the fact that human beings are created in the image of God refers to something which is not extrinsic or accessory, but essential. It is indeed what constitutes them as what they are. The search for what differentiates humans from other creatures, making them unique within creation, and therefore the identification of the *imago Dei* with some human attribute, capacity, or quality, such as reason or will, has historically been an attempt to assert the ontological implications of the image, though with the risk of highlighting merely some human traits at the expense of others. Nevertheless, as the International Theological Commission states, there is consensus nowadays on affirming both the ontological character of the image, as well as the integral character of the latter, namely, that the “human person as a whole is the bearer of the divine image in a spiritual as well as a bodily dimension.”<sup>218</sup>

A relational interpretation underlines that God has created humans in God’s image in order to share with them the communion of trinitarian life. This is why the image is “essentially dialogical or relational in its ontological structure.”<sup>219</sup> Being created in the image of God is indeed what enables humanity to partake of divine communion. It is also what drives human beings toward communion with one another. As a result, humanity is oriented by its constitution as image of God toward interpersonal communion. It is worth noting that while asserting the relational character of the *imago Dei*, the document of the International

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., n. 31.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., n. 45.

Theological Commission is also emphatic in stating its ontological implications. This is ultimately why the image, although impaired by sin, can never be totally destroyed, “since it defines the whole structure of human nature.”<sup>220</sup> Salvation in Christ reconfigures the *imago Dei* in its proper orientation toward participation in divine communion.

Finally, a functionalist interpretation underscores both the dynamic character of the image and its implications for the relationship between humanity and other creatures. Humanity is established as the image of God within creation, inasmuch as it partakes in the divine rule over creation. Therefore, God allows “the creature made in his image to participate in his work, in his project of love and salvation, indeed in his own lordship over the universe.”<sup>221</sup> As mentioned, this is not to say that humanity has the right of a limitless dominion over other creatures. Human beings participate in the divine governance, but they can never displace it. They exert a delegated authority which must imitate its source in the way it is exercised. Moreover, the International Theological Commission draws on the notion of natural law<sup>222</sup> to assert both the ontological character of the human participation in the divine rule over creation, and the limits that humanity should respect in this collaboration, which is ultimately oriented toward the transformation of the whole of creation which is called to participate in the divine life. Accordingly, the notion that the commission uses to refer to the role of humanity within creation is stewardship.

To sum up, these three understanding of the *imago Dei* provide all together a complementary approach to this theological motif, which combines the distinctive nuances of

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., n. 46.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., n. 57.

<sup>222</sup> See Ibid., n. 60.

all its biblical occurrences. This complementary approach hence allows theology to state the ontological character of the image, on the one hand, and its dialogical dimension, on the other. Human beings are in the image of God inasmuch as they are created to partake of divine communion. This relational nature of the image evinces both its dynamic and performative character. Thus, the image is not only susceptible of being renewed – this is what the Christ event accomplished – but it also entails consequences for humanity in its relationship with other creatures. Human beings are the image of God on the earth insofar as they are called to share in God's governance and care for creation.<sup>223</sup>

The interplay of these three interpretations therefore not only sheds light on the place and role of human beings on earth, but also helps theology to re-imagine its understanding of humanity within the context of the current ecological crisis. As mentioned, the *imago Dei* as theological motif should not be silenced or discarded for its allegedly anthropocentric depiction of humanity. On the contrary, it rather enables theology to provide an ecologically friendly representation of human beings, at the same time challenging for us, inasmuch as it aims to orient and inspire them in their relationship with the rest of creatures. Moreover, I believe that when it is understood in terms of *kenosis*, the *imago Dei* exhibits all its ecological strength, and it shows itself as a timely, meaningful, and sound understanding of humanity for our time. The notion of *kenosis* indeed not only effectively intertwines the substantialist, relational, and functionalist interpretations of the *imago Dei*, but also serves as a specifier for them, insofar as

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<sup>223</sup> It is worth noting that, drawing on Aquinas' account of the *imago Dei*, Celia Deane-Drummond emphasizes the performative character of the image and the crucial role of grace in perfecting it. She states that while natural capacities are important, they are not sufficient for defining either human nature or image-bearing. She proposes the term "graced nature" to show that grace is not somehow "added" onto nature but, rather, nature is transformed by the action of God's grace. Her approach hence rightly underlines the Christological dimension of the image and its orientation toward action. See Deane-Drummond, "God's Image and Likeness in Humans and Other Animals: Performative Soul-Making and Graced Nature," 945–46.

it gives them concrete content and practical orientation for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. Reading the *imago Dei* theological motif through the lens of the notion of *kenosis* enables theology to display the ontological implications of the image, its relational character, as well as its performative dimension, inasmuch as it should control the way in which human beings relate to other creatures. This perspective also assumes the Christological understanding of the *imago Dei*, which has been progressively emphasized in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. It is ultimately only in the mystery of the incarnate Word that the mystery of humanity takes on light (GS 22). It is time therefore to explore how the notion of *kenosis* specifies the *imago Dei* and provides a meaningful and inspiring understanding of it.

#### **B) *Imago Dei* as *Kenosis*: Biblical and Systematic Perspectives**

One may legitimately ask why the notion of *kenosis* should play a role in the interpretation of the *imago Dei* theological motif; why this term, which is primarily a Christological notion, should come to the fore when theology seeks to unfold what being created in the image of God could mean for humanity? For some it may appear to be an unwarranted association or an arbitrary movement. Nevertheless, I think that reading the *imago Dei* through the lens of the notion of *kenosis* is not only reasonable, but it is also a theological requirement if one wants to be faithful to the biblical data and to the intimate connection between Christology and anthropology. Affirming that human beings have been created in the image of God is first of all a theological statement, which primarily says something about God, and only then something about humanity. Our attention is immediately and rightly drawn to the God in whose image human beings are said to have been created.

Accordingly, we look at God in order to get any hint which may give a definite meaning to this theological statement. We look at God asking about God's main features and about what characterizes God as God. In other words, if we want to provide precise and concrete meaning to the *imago Dei*, the first and most important theological question is: who is this God who has created creatures in God's own image? Therefore, anything that shows and reveals who God is and what God does is potentially crucial for pinning down the meaning and content of the theological understanding of the *imago Dei*. In this sense, the New Testament is not only emphatic in pointing to Christ as the true image of God (2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15), but it also emphasizes that whoever has seen Jesus, has seen the Father (John 14:9), and that Jesus is the one who reveals the Father (Mt 11:27). A Christocentric vision of the *imago Dei* therefore – to focus on the only image we have been given: Jesus – is not only warranted but a theological requirement. It is in this respect that I believe that the notion of *kenosis* – inasmuch as it unveils something about who God is and what God does – is vital for providing a timely and meaningful understanding of *imago Dei* in the context of the current ecological crisis.

### **1. The *locus classicus* of *kenosis*: Philippians 2:5-11**

The theological notion of *kenosis* is rooted in the Pauline letter to the Philippians. There, the Greek word *εκενωσεν* conveys a deliberate action by Jesus Christ: he emptied himself (Phil 2:7), which epitomizes what Jesus Christ's mindset or attitude was, and which Paul asks Philippians to take into account. Much has been written about this letter and specifically about the passage where this notion is found: Phil 2:5-11. I intend neither to examine all the exegetical controversies and theories which have been advanced for this specific passage through history, nor to solve all the dilemmas that this text implies for exegesis. This would

certainly bring us out of the purpose and scope of this analysis.<sup>224</sup> What I intend, rather, is to highlight some significant insights from the interpretation of this passage which are valuable for the theological understanding of the *imago Dei*. I will therefore focus on those aspects of the text that shed light on what *kenosis* actually means for Jesus Christ, and that consequently inspire and specify what being created in the image of God entails for humanity. There is definitely much disagreement in the interpretation of this passage, and its study has certainly become a battle field of technical details. Nonetheless I believe that these differences do not affect the core message of this text and the elements that this analysis wants to highlight.

Before entering into the details of the exegesis, it is important to summarize some of the main features of Philippians. It is widely held by current scholarship that Philippians has been written while Paul was in prison. Nevertheless, there is no consensus about the date of the letter. Depending on the city where the letter was allegedly written – Ephesus, Rome, Caesarea, or Corinth – its date ranges from 50 C.E to early 60 C.E.<sup>225</sup> However, neither its place of origin nor its writing date affect significantly its interpretation. It is usually considered as one letter, though some scholars suggest that the letter we have was originally more than one, and that it is the result of the joining of at least two letters.<sup>226</sup> Nonetheless again, the disagreement

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<sup>224</sup> For a good contemporary account of the exegesis of this passage, see, among other, Bonnie Beattie Thurston and Judith Ryan, *Sacra Pagina: Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2009), 80–93; Jean-Noël Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie., 2005), 132–176; Claudio Basevi, “Estudio literario y teológico del himno cristológico de la epístola a los filipenses (Phil. 2,6-11),” *Scripta Theologica* 30, no. 2 (1998): 439–72.; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 191–229; Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997); Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 186–271; N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 56–98; and, Jean-Baptiste Edart, *L’Epître Aux Philippiens, Rhétorique et Composition Stylistique*, Etudes Bibliques. Nouvelle Série 45 (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie., 2002), 127–88.

<sup>225</sup> Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 30.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 31–33.

about the integrity of the letter does not imply any important consequence for the interpretation of the passage we are concerned with. As to the form and the structure of the letter, it has been studied against the background of the rhetorical patterns and forms of Greco-Roman letters. As a result, for instance, while some suggest that Paul follows in Philippians the conventions of a letter of friendship, others think that Paul writes this text as a letter of consolation to encourage Philippians in their distress because of his imprisonment, or that Paul structures the letter according to the pattern of a family letter.<sup>227</sup> The pattern and form of Greco-Roman letters with which Philippians is equated, certainly affects how the structure of Paul's letter is established, how its different components are valued, and what role these components are said to be playing within the letter. At any rate, as shown by the most noteworthy commentaries and multiple specific works, this does not have significant impact on the interpretation of what is considered to be one of the most important passages of Philippians, namely, 2:5-11. As a result, it can be said that the current disagreements about the writing date of Philippians, its place of origin, its original integrity, and its form and structure, do not prevent exegetes from examining the letter and arriving at some consensus in its interpretation, which are valuable for understanding the notion of *kenosis*, and therefore, for specifying what the *imago Dei* means for humanity. Hence, I turn now to some key insights of this passage, which are both enlightening and promising for the theological view on human beings.

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 34–37.

### *a. Background and form of the passage*

There is consensus among scholars in stating that these verses, 2:5-11, form a unity in themselves, which can be examined in its structure, grammatical particularities, and meaning. However, despite the general agreement on attributing Philippians to Paul, scholars debate about the origin of this particular text. Some believe that Paul is using an earlier liturgical hymn, which he inserts and modifies within the letter.<sup>228</sup> Others, taking distance from this perspective, not only deny the hymn-genre of this passage, but also affirm that it has been written by Paul.<sup>229</sup> It is noteworthy that, despite the particular vocabulary and style that the passage exhibits, as well as its internal parallelism and symmetry, there are not apodictic reasons to affirm that Paul is actually using and editing an existing hymn.<sup>230</sup> Anyway, even if Paul is drawing on pre-existing material, this should not lead anyone to the conclusion that the text can be interpreted independently of its current context and the function that it plays within the entire letter. Its meaning therefore must be unfolded against the background of the whole of Philippians.

Along the same lines, the debate around Pauline authorship of this passage is crucial only because of the consequences that it may entail for the understanding of the text. In this

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<sup>228</sup> English biblical scholar Ralph P. Martin is one of the most prominent advocates of this stance. This passage is for him an early Christian Hymn, composed originally in praise of the church's Lord. It is therefore a Christ-hymn, in which the early Christian community – as in every Christ-Hymn – praises God for his mighty deeds in creation and redemption, and in so doing makes God's once-for-all acts in salvation history a story happening at the present time. See Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, xlvii.

<sup>229</sup> American biblical scholar Gordon Fee, for instance, disavows the idea that this passage is a primitive Christian Hymn to Christ, and affirms that it can perfectly well be a Pauline text. Moreover, if it clearly was a hymn, there should be agreement about its parts and structure, which is the case of other hymns in the NT, such as Col 1:15-18 and 1Tim 3:16. Instead, those who advocate for the hymnic character of the text, need to "(1) excise lines, (2) dismiss the obvious inner logic of the whole, or (3) create lines that are either without parallelism or verbless." Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 43.

<sup>230</sup> Bonnie Thurston thinks that while British and American evangelical scholarship tends to assume that Paul wrote the hymn, continental scholarship (particularly German and French) leans to the position that Paul is working with a pre-existing hymn of Semitic origin. Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 86.

sense, it would be flawed to think, for those who uphold the primitive origin of these verses, that the text does not fit Pauline theology and that it is not representative of his thinking. Australian biblical scholar Peter O'Brien states clearly that the passage not only belongs in its present context and forms a highly significant section of the overall argument of 1:27--2:18, but also its vocabulary evokes that of the verses immediately preceding (2:1-4). The text prefigures as well themes that appear later in the letter (e.g. 3:20-21).<sup>231</sup> Even though the vocabulary of the text – which contains a few *hapax legomena* – and some of its theological emphases do not exactly match what is seen as classic Pauline style, the passage should not be considered foreign to his thinking or theological stance. The fact that Paul may have been possibly using existing material does not imply that the text has to be regarded as non-Pauline. Phil 2:5-11 is currently indeed in a wider context, which is determinant for both unfolding its meaning and establishing its function. The idea that Paul has edited a former text – inserting or adding some phrases – and the consequent searching for these interpolations have proved to be extremely hypothetical and highly dependent on what is considered to be the text's original background: Gnostic, Hellenistic mythology, Jewish, and its original language: Greek or Semitic.<sup>232</sup>

Without reviewing all hypotheses and theories about authorship, original background, form, and language of this passage, I think that the following are the conclusions which are central for this analysis of the text. First, the passage perfectly fits its current context, and therefore it has to be interpreted against the background of the entire letter to the Philippians.

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<sup>231</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 202. N.T. Wright is also inclined to Pauline authorship of the text: "if someone were to take it upon themselves to argue, on the basis of my conclusions, that the 'hymn' was originally written by Paul himself precisely in order to give Christological and above all theological underpinning to the rest of Philippians, especially chs. 2 and 3, I for one should find it hard to produce convincing counterarguments." Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 98.

<sup>232</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 140.

The idea that the text's allegedly original meaning and intention can be established independently of its current context – and therefore that the Pauline use of the text should be understood in parallel to this primeval form – should be discarded. Inasmuch as there is no material evidence of a former text, we will never have sure answers about the text's supposed original form and theological emphasis, nor about its use by the early Christian community.<sup>233</sup> Therefore, it is both its current context and Paul's intent – not any supposed primitive form and use – that is essential for the interpretation of this passage.<sup>234</sup> Secondly, what Paul may allegedly have added to an existing text – e.g. death on a cross – is of little interest, for given its current context, the whole text, and not just some of its parts, accounts for Pauline theology. By no means can it be stated that only the elements supposedly introduced by Paul would reflect his own theology. The text in its entirety has to be assumed as Pauline thinking. Thirdly, among all the possible original backgrounds which have been proposed to this passage, it is important to note that while the larger Graeco-Roman context must not be ignored, the immediate early Christian context of language and ethos is most significant.<sup>235</sup> This is another way to state that the hypothetical original background of the text should not be determinative in its interpretation, and that its actual Christian context – literary and vital – is certainly crucial.

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<sup>233</sup> See, for instance, Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians & Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>234</sup> This is certainly the opposite of what Martin proposes in his study: “it is of the utmost importance to isolate the meaning of the terms in the hymn from the use which is made of them by Paul in the verses which precede and follow”, and “once the hymn’s significance in its original form is detached from the use Paul makes of it, we are relieved of these irritating difficulties of interpretation,” Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 215 and 289 respectively.

<sup>235</sup> See Larry W. Hurtado, “Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11,” in *From Jesus to Paul. Studies in Honor of Francis Wright Beare*, ed. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 113–26. Hurtado affirms that “The language used to describe Jesus’ actions qualitatively in 2:6-8 is drawn from the language of early Christian paraenesis and possibly from the Jesus tradition of the Pauline period. This suggests that the tradition of the earthly Jesus was influential in shaping both this description of his actions, and possibly early Christian paraenesis. Further, this evidence suggests strongly that Jesus’ actions are so described as to present them as a pattern to which the readers are to conform their behaviour” (p. 126).

Finally, deciding whether or not the passage is a pre-Pauline hymn is not as important as the exegetical consequences that one may eventually draw from this dilemma. Though some have convincingly argued against considering Phil 2:5-11 as a hymn,<sup>236</sup> it is not the notion of hymn that may be problematic, but rather the idea that because it would be a pre-Pauline hymn, the text could be interpreted independently of its current context and function, and regardless of Paul's intent in using it. Defining this passage as a hymn may have an impact on the definition of its structure, but not necessarily on its interpretation. Therefore, Philippians 2:5-11 undoubtedly expresses Pauline theology, and both its meaning and function must be established in relation with the rest of the letter.

**b. Some key expressions: *μορφή*, *αρπαγμον*, and *εκενωσεν***

It can be said that the interpretation of this passage, which is certainly thorny, revolves around some key expressions. Indeed, the analysis and clarification of the meaning of some crucial notions of this text have proved determinant for establishing Paul's intent with these verses, and the message addressed to the Philippians through them. In the following pages, I do not aim at an exhaustive exegesis of this passage, which would go well beyond the limits and scope of this project, but rather I intend to focus on the interpretation of some key terms, namely, *μορφή*, *αρπαγμον*, and *εκενωσεν* in contemporary scholarly exegesis. They are pivotal for understanding what Jesus' *kenosis* may mean theologically and therefore for shedding light on the implications of the *imago Dei* for humanity.

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<sup>236</sup> See, for instance, Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 108–113, and Basevi, “Estudio literario y teológico del himno cristológico de la epístola a los filipenses (Phil. 2,6-11),” 471.

It is almost unanimously agreed that the text is divided in two parts vv 6-8 and 9-11, and v 5 is considered to be an introduction to the subsequent verses, in which Paul invites the Philippians to have in themselves what Jesus Christ's mind or attitude was. It is important to state from the outset that Paul is not simply proposing an exemplary role model which would be extrinsic to Philippians – and by extension to all believers – but he is rather pointing to the interior transformation or conformation to Christ's likeness, which occurs in those who follow Jesus Christ.<sup>237</sup> French exegete Jean-Noël Aletti also shows that the verb *φρονεῖν* can be understood to refer to a change of the opinion one has about oneself and others, which should be totally different from the one proposed by the mundane values of selfishness and conceit, to which Paul alludes in the preceding verses. In this sense, the center of gravity of this verb is not just the materiality of Jesus Christ's action, but rather a way of being, a manner of considering oneself and others, according to the spirit of humility and self-emptying love which will be presented in the following verses.<sup>238</sup>

The Greek words *διὸ καὶ* of verse 9 – which are translated as *and therefore* – divide the passage in two parts. While the first part shows a series of deliberate choices made by Jesus Christ: he emptied himself, took the form of a slave, humbled himself, and was obedient to the point of death on a cross, the second part shifts the focus to God the Father, who reacts to Jesus Christ's actions, exalting him and giving him the name which is above all other names:

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<sup>237</sup> The majority of exegetes subscribe to what has been called the ethical interpretation of this passage, namely, Paul is presenting Jesus Christ as a role model to the Philippians. I will present later on how this ethical interpretation should be understood, as well as the perspective of those who, opposing it, offer a different understanding: soteriological or kerygmatic interpretation (Käsemann and Martin). It is noteworthy that those who oppose the ethical interpretation understand the *Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* of this verse as a technical term which refers not to Jesus Christ, but to the community, namely, to those who live in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul would be encouraging the Philippians to behave accordingly to those who live in Jesus Christ.

<sup>238</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 137.

Lord, aiming toward universal proclamation and adoration. The first part hence emphasizes the intentional character of Jesus' behavior, who is the subject of all the verbs of this part. Although some important insights of the second part will be provided below, in order to draw out the meaning and scope of Jesus Christ's *kenosis*, I will concentrate on the first part of this passage, namely vv 6-8. As mentioned, there are some key expressions or notions in this part, which are crucial for an accurate understanding of both the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ, and Paul's intent with this text.

### **Form of God: *μορφή***

The first of these notions is *μορφή*, which appears twice – the only two occurrences in the NT – and is associated with both God and slave. Although the first occurrence is related to God – *μορφή θεου* – the meaning of this subject, as scholars affirm, must be necessarily clarified by its second occurrence, when it is linked with the imagery of slavery (*μορφή δουλού*), and it is said that Jesus Christ has taken the form of a slave. Scholars agree in considering that Paul is looking for a word suitable for this dual usage, able to characterize Jesus Christ both in the form of God and in the form of a slave. Therefore, they believe that *μορφή* in this context needs to be understood as “form” or “shape,” though not only in the sense of exterior appearance – face, body, flesh – but also and especially in terms of those characteristics and qualities which are essential to it. As Fee states, *μορφή* therefore means

“that which truly characterizes a given reality.”<sup>239</sup> It denotes hence the visible manifestation of a given real condition,<sup>240</sup> or the true expression of the inner self.<sup>241</sup>

For some scholars v 6 refers to the pre-existent Christ, who would be the subject of the action described in that verse. It would be indeed a statement about the pre-existence of Christ, and in this sense, it would be a strong Christological affirmation, and one of the clearest NT testimonies about this. As a result, in using *μορφὴ θεοῦ* Paul would be intentionally asserting Christ’s pre-existence. Those who uphold this view therefore believe that the first part of this passage (vv 6-8), refers first to the pre-existent Christ (v 6) and only then to his earthly life (vv 7-8), when he took the form of a slave, humbled himself, and was obedient to the point of a death on a cross.<sup>242</sup> Consequently, Jesus Christ’s *kenosis* would be first of all related to his incarnation.

Others think that vv 6-8 refer only to the earthly life of Jesus Christ, and that v 6 should not be understood as stating his pre-existence. It is not that this passage denies Christ’s pre-existent life, but rather that this is not its main focus or intent. Therefore, Paul does not aim to make a strong Christological assertion in this passage, but rather he is offering Jesus Christ as an example to Philippians. I think that, among others, French biblical scholar Jean-Noël Aletti argues convincingly to show that these verses have to do with the divine Christ in his

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<sup>239</sup> Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 204. See also Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 152; Edart, *L’Epître Aux Philippiens, Rhétorique et Composition Stylistique*, 157; and O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 210–11.

<sup>240</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 153.

<sup>241</sup> Teresia Yai-Chow Wong, “The Problem of Pre-Existence in Philippians 2,6-11,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 62, no. 4 (1986): 271.

<sup>242</sup> Among those who support this stance, see for instance, Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 202–3. See especially n. 41 on page 203, where he counters some of the arguments of those who deny that v 6 refers to Christ’s pre-existence; and O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 206 and 211.

incarnation, and not to his pre-existence.<sup>243</sup> The first argument he provides is an historical one. He underlines that the early interpretation of this text made by the Latin and Greek Fathers until St. Ambrose, has mostly understood vv 6-7 as referring to the incarnate Christ. He thinks that the Arian controversy has greatly influenced the reading of this text, and as result, it is only after St. Ambrose and the Ambrosiaster that the Latin Fathers customarily begin interpreting it as an assertion of Christ's pre-existence. This interpretation hence will be rooted in and reinforced by the technical distinction between the pre-existent Logos and the incarnate Logos which is set up in the wake of Nicaea I.<sup>244</sup> The Arian polemic would have inclined the Fathers toward one interpretation of the text – the one that secures Christ's pre-existence and therefore Christ's divine character – resulting unfortunately in the forgetting of other interpretations, which associate the text with the incarnate Christ, and are less concerned with the Christological controversies. The second argument provided by Aletti is a contextual one. He says that when Paul in his letters introduces Christ as an example, he alludes to Jesus' earthly life and his feelings vis-à-vis humanity, and not to the pre-existent Logos. Paul, for instance, presents Jesus as an example of generosity (2 Cor 8:9), welcome (Rom 15:7), forgiveness (Col 3:13), and charity (Eph 5:2).<sup>245</sup> Providing supplementary references (namely,

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<sup>243</sup> Aletti shows that even though the list of exegetes that support this perspective is long: A. Feuillet, P. Bonnard, L. Cerfaux, P. Lamarche, O. Cullmann, G. Bornkamm, P. Grelot, J. Heriban, J. Murphy-O'Connor, there is no consensus among scholars on this point. Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 150 n. 121. Even though she opposes the interpretation that v 6 already refers to the Incarnate Christ, Teresia Yai-Chow Wong, provides an older long list of authors supporting this perspective. See Wong, "The Problem of Pre-Existence in Philippians 2,6-11," 267 n. 2.

<sup>244</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 150. For a good account of the patristic interpretation of this passage by the Latin Fathers, see Pierre Grelot, "La Traduction et L'interprétation de Ph. 2,6-7. Quelques Éléments D'enquête Patristique," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 93, no. 9 and 10 (1971): 897–922, 1009–26. The author shows how, in the context of the Arian controversy, the interpretation provided by Ambrose and the Ambrosiaster will prevail at the expense of other understandings of the text, which do not allude to Christ's pre-existence. Augustine and Thomas will assume, and therefore strengthen, this interpretation. Grelot believes that, even though it is an orthodox one, it is linked with a series of misunderstandings which do not respect the structure of the Greek text.

<sup>245</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 135.

Rom 15:3, 8; 1 Cor 10:31--11:1; 2 Cor 4:8-11; 5:14; and 1 Thess 1:6) L. W. Hurtado asserts that these verses are clear evidence that the earthly Jesus in his self-sacrifice is cited by Paul as a pattern for behavior.<sup>246</sup> Therefore, in the context of the entire Pauline corpus it is reasonable and consistent to think that the one whom Paul presents as an example in Phil 2:6 is the incarnate Christ and not the pre-existent Logos. Along the same lines, Aletti wonders if the invitation to imitate Christ would be still suitable if Paul was proposing to Philippians to take into account the deliberate action of the preexistent Logos, which would certainly be something difficult to identify with, and embody.<sup>247</sup>

The remaining arguments that Aletti offers to substantiate his position stem from a close reading of the text. First of all, he asserts that given that *μορφή* denotes corporality and visibility, and that the participle which accompanies it – *υπαρχων* - is never used by Paul in statements about God, it is then warranted to think that v 6: *εν μορφη θεου υπαρχων* refers to the divine condition of the incarnate Christ, and not to the pre-existent Logos.<sup>248</sup> Secondly, those who dismiss the reference to Christ's preexistence in v 6, have to provide an understanding of the subsequent verses in which Jesus Christ's incarnation therefore does not play any role. In fact, when v 6 is said to allude to the pre-existent Logos, v 7 is read as asserting that Jesus Christ emptied himself, took the form of a slave, and was born in human likeness (incarnation). Aletti therefore affirms that it is important to remember that the contrast Paul makes is between *μορφη θεου* and *μορφη δουλου*, and not with *μορφη ανθρωπου*, even if some want to equate *δουλος* with *ανθρωπος*. In this sense, the passage does not say simply

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<sup>246</sup> Hurtado, "Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11," 120.

<sup>247</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 161.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 154.

that Christ who was God became man, but rather that Jesus Christ who was in the form of God took the form of a slave.<sup>249</sup> As a result, *εν ομοιωματι ανθπωπων γενομενος* should neither be considered as a pinning down of the previous affirmation – *μορφην δουλου λαβων* – nor be linked to it. On the contrary, Aletti believes that *εν ομοιωματι ανθπωπων γενομενος* is the beginning of a new phrase which is closely connected with *σχηματι ευπεθεις ως ανθρωπος*. He thinks hence that in this situation *γενομενοσ* has to be translated as *being* – so related to the verb *ειμι* – and not as *becoming* and then related to the verb *γινομαι*.<sup>250</sup> Accordingly, the text has to be read as asserting that Christ being like human beings, and being recognized as a human being, he humbled himself. Therefore, there is no temporal sequence between the two affirmations, as if the text was saying that first Christ became in the likeness of human beings, and then he was recognized as a human being, but rather it is a cumulative dual assertion of the same reality, first from the viewpoint of what it is, and then from the viewpoint of viewers. Aletti states hence that “the text goes from a statement about being, to a statement about recognition: Christ appeared and was recognized for what he wanted to be and the way he wanted to be.”<sup>251</sup> The text is not redundant, but rather it emphasizes Jesus Christ's human condition from two different perspectives. Thereby, vv 6-8 do not describe an itinerary that begins with Christ's pre-existence, and follows with his incarnation, humiliation and obedience, but rather it refers all the time to the incarnate Christ, who is the subject of all the actions depicted in these verses.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. my translation.

Although the decision between whether the text alludes to Christ's pre-existent life or not is not essential for showing how the notion of *kenosis* elucidates the theological understanding of the *imago Dei*, as will be shown below, I believe that, when the text is assumed to refer only to the incarnate Christ, the idea of self-emptying oneself acquires a higher, inspiring and meaningful significance. Therefore, contrary to what Fee asserts, I believe that, if the text does not point to the pre-existent Logos, the notion of *kenosis* is neither emptied of its content nor is the narrative of the text divested of its essential power,<sup>252</sup> but rather in this case the notion of *kenosis* denotes and evokes other ideas which are not clearly present when it is almost equated to the idea of incarnation.

***He does not use it for his own advantage: αρπαγμον***

The second key notion of vv 6-8, in order to obtain an accurate understanding of their meaning, is *αρπαγμον*. It is a *hapax legomenon* which does not have parallels in the LXX and it is rare in extra-biblical materials.<sup>253</sup> This notion is directly related in the text to *το ειναι τσα θεω* which is usually understood as a complementary phrase of *μορφη θεου* and translated as expressing equality with God; therefore, the text states that Jesus Christ possesses equality with God the Father.<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, the center of gravity of this phrase is not the assertion of this equality, but rather that Jesus Christ did not consider it as *αρπαγμον*. What therefore does this uncommon expression mean?

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<sup>252</sup> See Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 203 n. 41 and 210 n. 78.

<sup>253</sup> Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 81.

<sup>254</sup> See, for instance, Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 207–8; O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 215–16; Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 157–58.

N.T. Wright offers, in a thorough and widely cited article, the most satisfactory and exhaustive examination of this notion.<sup>255</sup> In his interpretation of *αρπάγμον* he combines the work of two other scholars – Roy Hoover and C.F.D Moule – and shows that they are complementary approaches, which enable theology to disclose the meaning of this term. In the wake of Hoover’s work, Wright states that *αρπάγμον* has to be interpreted both in relation to *ηγησατο* and as being part of an idiomatic expression meaning “something to take advantage of” or “something to be used for one’s own advantage”.<sup>256</sup> Accordingly, the text asserts that Jesus Christ did not consider his equality with God as something to take advantage of or to be used for his own benefit. Paul is using therefore an idiomatic expression in order to state that Jesus Christ did not see the equality with God he possesses, as something to be used for his own advantage or as a condition to be exploited for his own gain. Wright believes that despite the fact that Hoover’s interpretation of *αρπάγμον* renders untenable other understandings of this notion, it is nevertheless capable of including many of their strong points within itself as well as of making excellent theological sense.<sup>257</sup> According to this perspective – and contrary to some interpretations – the text asserts that equality with God is something that Jesus Christ already has. In fact, after a careful study of its extra biblical usage, Hoover states that this

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<sup>255</sup> N.T. Wright, “Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 321–52. Wright has revised and expanded this article in another publication: Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 56–98. In these publications Wright exposes ten different ways in which the most prominent scholars have understood the notion of *αρπάγμον*. These ten different understandings can be basically grouped in three main approaches and their combinations: 1. *res rapta*, in which *αρπάγμον* is interpreted as ‘an act of robbery’; Jesus Christ hence did not consider his equality with God as something undue or an act of usurpation, but rather as something that belongs to him *de jure*; 2. *res retinenda*, in which *αρπάγμον* is interpreted as ‘something to be clung on to’; Jesus Christ hence did not consider his equality with God as something to hold tight or retain; 3. *res rapienda*, in which *αρπάγμον* is interpreted as ‘something to be grasped *de novo*, something, that is, not already possessed’; Jesus Christ hence did not consider equality with God as something to be grabbed or snatched.

<sup>256</sup> See Wright, “Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11,” 338–9; and, Roy W. Hoover, “The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 1 (January 1, 1971): 118.

<sup>257</sup> Wright, “Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11,” 339.

idiomatic expression always refers to something already present and at one's disposal. The question in such instances is indeed "not whether or not one possesses something, but whether or not one chooses to exploit something."<sup>258</sup>

Wright combines the result of Hoover's study, with the interpretation of *ἀρπάγμον* that C.F.D. Moule offers. The latter thinks that this notion has to be understood in its active and abstract sense and therefore meaning: *raptus*. Hence, the text would be asserting that Jesus Christ did not regard equality with God as consisting in "snatching" or "grasping." In this perspective, and contrary to the standard picture of oriental despots, divine equality did not mean for Jesus Christ "getting," but rather "giving," which is properly expressed in self-giving love.<sup>259</sup>

It is worth noting that the participial phrase *εν μορφη θεου υπαρχων* can be grammatically understood not only as concessive, but also as causative. While in the former sense the phrase would be asserting that *though* he was in the form of God, Jesus Christ nevertheless did not consider his equality with God as something to use for his own benefit, the latter sense would be affirming that *precisely because* he was in the form of God, Jesus Christ did not consider his equality with God as something to take advantage of for his own gain. The causative interpretation therefore underlines that Jesus Christ's condition is precisely what

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<sup>258</sup> Hoover, "The Harpagmos Enigma," 118. Given that I support the view that v 6 does not refer to the pre-existent Logos, it is important to notice that Wright – although he does not endorse this view – recognizes that Hoover's interpretation of *ἀρπάγμον* does not of itself rule out the possibility that *το ειναι ισα θεω* (and *a fortiori*, *εν μορφη θεου υπαρχων*) could be taken in a strictly humane sense: it affirms only that this equality is already possessed. See Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," 344 n. 85.

<sup>259</sup> Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," 345. As Moule expresses himself: "Thus, the case for interpreting *arpagmos* in our passage as *raptus* "snatching" or "acquisitiveness" seems to me to be a strong one. That deity means not, as is popularly supposed, getting, but, paradoxically, giving is, indeed, the heart of the revelation in Christ Jesus." C.F.D Moule, "Further Reflections on Philippians 2:5-11," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970), 276.

motivates him not to use it for his own advantage, whereas the concessive understanding highlights that Jesus Christ renounces what he had a right to because of his condition. Wright states that the causative sense is the one which Moule prefers, as well as the one that an accurate interpretation of the text requires.<sup>260</sup> In either case, the emphasis of the text is on Jesus Christ's deliberate decision not to take advantage of his position or not to use it for his own benefit. Therefore, as Wright puts it, combining the works of Hoover and Moule, Paul's use of *ἀρπάγμον* implies that "Christ might have regarded his equality with God as meaning snatching (or, as something to take advantage of), but on the contrary he chose (to regard it as meaning) the way of self-giving, and, further, to act on that understanding."<sup>261</sup> Accordingly, Jesus Christ makes clear that what really embodies and reveals God is not the way of "getting" or "grabbing," or the attitude of taking advantage of one's own condition for one's own benefit, but rather what ultimately defines and makes manifest God is self-giving love. Given that Jesus understood his equality with God in this sense, we therefore already have a glimpse of what the *imago Dei* may imply for humanity.

### ***He emptied himself: εκενωσεν***

Finally, the third key notion of the first part of the text is *εκενωσεν*. It is the only occurrence of this verb in the Bible where it is used with a reflexive pronoun, namely, Jesus Christ *εκενωσεν* himself. It is worth noting that the Greek adversative *αλλα* - which initiates the phrase – establishes a sharp contrast between what Jesus Christ could have chosen and

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<sup>260</sup> Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," 345 n. 87. While, P. O'Brien also advocates for the causative sense of this participial phrase, see O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 216. J.N. Aletti opts for the concessive sense. See Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 158.

<sup>261</sup> Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," 350.

what he really did. In this sense, the meaning of *kenosis* is directly related – indeed as its opposite – to what has been said about the understanding of *αρπαγμον*. Jesus Christ did not consider his equality with God as 'grabbing' or as a something to take advantage of for his own gain, but rather - and in great contrast - he *εκενωσεν* himself. This verb is usually translated as "he emptied himself," and scholars agree on its metaphorical sense. Jesus Christ does not empty himself as one can empty a barrel or a bottle,<sup>262</sup> nor does the verb require a genitive qualifier that he must have 'emptied himself' of something.<sup>263</sup> Therefore, Jesus Christ did not empty himself of anything, he emptied himself; and he poured himself out.<sup>264</sup>

Some elements of the text need to be emphasized in order to get an accurate understanding of Jesus Christ's *kenosis*. First of all, the passage refers to a deliberate and voluntary act of Jesus. It is not imposed on him, and nothing makes it necessary, unless perhaps only – as the text underlines – the way Jesus conceives of his divine equality with God, and the implications that therefore this entails for him. Jesus Christ's *kenosis* is therefore the outcome of an intentional and mysterious decision, namely, he has chosen to appear and be recognized not as *κυριος* but rather as *δουλος* with all the human and social consequences related to this condition.<sup>265</sup> Secondly, the inquiry about what Jesus Christ has emptied himself of or what he has given up of himself, is a wrong path. Paul's use of *kenosis* in this text does not require nor imply that Jesus has renounced something which was essential to him such as divine

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<sup>262</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 160.

<sup>263</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 210.

<sup>264</sup> For a good summary of different understandings of the meaning of *kenosis*, see Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 158–161, and O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 218–24.

<sup>265</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 160.

properties or attributes.<sup>266</sup> For, “God cannot stop being God. What Jesus relinquished was privilege, not essence.”<sup>267</sup> Jesus does not renounce his equality with God, but he does not take advantage of this for his own benefit. Therefore, and thirdly, this is what is meant by affirming the metaphorical sense of Jesus Christ’s *kenosis*. It does not mean indeed that the latter is not real or that it did not happen, but rather that it does not require a direct object, namely, something Jesus would have divested himself of. Jesus does not give up anything of his divine condition, but he pours himself out through self-giving love. Finally, the contrast that Paul establishes is between *μορφὴ θεοῦ* and *μορφὴ δουλοῦ*, which is the one that Jesus has freely chosen. This is why Paul’s intent in using the language and imagery of slavery is central for understanding the scope and deep meaning of Jesus’ *kenosis*. Taking into account that Paul is writing to Christian readers with a pagan past – the Philippians – O’Brien thinks that the best way of understanding the image of slavery is against the background of slavery in contemporary society. Therefore, slavery points to deprivation of one’s rights, even those related to one’s own life and person.<sup>268</sup> In this sense, he thinks that the contrast between *μορφὴ θεοῦ* and

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<sup>266</sup> This is contrary to kenotic Christology which was developed over the 19<sup>th</sup> century by German (Lutherans) and English (Anglicans) scholars, and it is still supported by some theologians. The overarching thesis of this approach is that at the incarnation Christ divested himself of some non-essential or relative divine attributes or properties, namely, omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence, while retaining other essential attributes such as holiness, righteousness, and love. It is worth noting that – as contemporary exegesis has shown – Philippians does not offer any basis for such speculations. For a good presentation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century kenotic Christology, see Thomas R. Thompson, “Nineteenth-Century Kenotic Christology: The Waxing, Waning, and Weighing of a Quest for a Coherent Orthodoxy,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74–111, and David R. Law, “Le Kénotisme Luthérien et Anglican: Les Christologies de Gottfried Thomasius et Frank Weston,” *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 89, no. 3 (2014): 313–40. For a contemporary defense of kenotic Christology see Stephen Davis, “Is Kenosis Orthodox?,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 112–38, and for a critical approach see Sarah Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 246–64.

<sup>267</sup> Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 83.

<sup>268</sup> See O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 223, and Moule, “Further Reflections on Philippians 2:5-11,” 268.

*μορφὴ δούλου* implies that Jesus “displayed the nature or form of God in the nature or form of a slave, thereby showing clearly not only what his character was like, but also what it meant to be God.”<sup>269</sup> Paul is using language that has positive overtones for his readers, and that can be also associated, in the way the apostle uses it in his letters, with the word group of *διακονία*. Accordingly, Hurtado believes that the primary Pauline association with the term *δούλος* is servitude to God and to others.<sup>270</sup> Hence, Jesus Christ's *kenosis* and his taking the form of a slave refers, on the one hand, to the voluntary deprivation of rights and its necessary consequences – paradoxically Jesus freely chooses a condition that no one wants –<sup>271</sup> and, on the other hand, to service and love for others – Jesus shows by his life that divine equality ultimately means sacrificial self-giving.<sup>272</sup>

The way of *kenosis* is therefore for Jesus the path between the *μορφὴ θεοῦ* and *μορφὴ δούλου*, which is a sharp contrast between the highest form of being (God), and the lowest form of being (slave).<sup>273</sup> It has already been established that this passage of Philippians likely refers to the incarnate Christ, and not to the pre-existent Logos. For those who uphold the latter, the notion of *kenosis* is intimately and directly related to the incarnation of Christ,

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<sup>269</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 224.

<sup>270</sup> See Hurtado, “Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11,” 122 n. 38. It is worth noting that some scholars offer a (theo)political reading of Phil 2, in which the notions of *kenosis* and slave explicitly point to an inversion of the values proposed by the Roman Empire. See, for instance, Robert Hurley, “De La Violence Divine À L'obéissance Esclave, Le Père et Le Fils Renoncent Au Pouvoir En Ph. 2,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 67, no. 1 (2011): 87–110.

<sup>271</sup> Aletti shows that, in Paul's time, one becomes slave as a war prisoner or by birth, and one was prone to choose slavery only because of hunger or a desperate financial situation. Jesus has therefore renounced power, glory, honor, and to be served, and he has instead preferred to be considered as a slave without rights and official status, in order to serve others. See Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 160.

<sup>272</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 216.

<sup>273</sup> See Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 82.

though the two terms and actions cannot simply be equated.<sup>274</sup> Indeed, it is evident that the notion *kenosis* cannot be reduced to Christ's incarnation, inasmuch as it is explicated in the text through the notion of *δουλος*. In addition to the reasons already given to dismiss the reference to the pre-existent Logos, I also believe that the notion of *kenosis* acquires all its evocative and inspiring power when, instead of being connected with the notion of incarnation, it is rather seen as a deliberate act of Jesus' earthly life. It is then that it displays all its potential impact and influence upon theological anthropology.

The notion of *kenosis* is related in the text not only to Jesus' act of taking the form of a slave, but also to his acts of self-humbling and obedience. In fact, the expression *εταπεινωσεν εαυτον* (he humbled himself) clearly echoes "emptied himself," and given that "humility" was a slave virtue, the verb aptly describes the "emptied condition" of Jesus which resulted from his *kenosis*.<sup>275</sup> Accordingly, Jesus' self-humbling expresses the final, climactic part of his consistent action of abasement.<sup>276</sup> It is also worth noting that the verb *εταπεινωσεν* clearly echoes the expression *ταπεινοφροσυνη* which Paul uses for encouraging everyone within the Philippian community to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but *in humility* regard others as better than oneself (v 3).

The notion of obedience – *υπηκοος* – in turn specifies what self-humility has ultimately meant for Jesus. In this sense, Jesus' self-humbling is expressed through his obedience to the point of death, and death on a cross. Even though the text does not clearly declare to whom Jesus is obedient, it can be rightly asserted – being faithful to the Pauline usage of the word

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<sup>274</sup> See, for instance, Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 213–14, and O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 218–24.

<sup>275</sup> See Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 83.

<sup>276</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 227.

group related to obedience – that Jesus is obedient first and primarily to the Father, and that this obedience is also embodied through Jesus' service vis-à-vis others. Aletti thinks that the fact that the text does not assert the recipient of Jesus' obedience highlights the act of obedience in itself, its duration, and its constancy, namely, a whole life right up to the end. Moreover, this fact emphasizes as well the imagery of slavery, inasmuch as slaves are defined by their dependency and obedience.<sup>277</sup> Nonetheless, in the Pauline corpus, obedience does not first consist of the recognition of someone's superiority to whom one would be subjected – in fact it should not be merely equated to submission – but it rather expresses the willingness to do the will, to be attentive and docile to the words of the one to whom one is obedient. It is important to keep in mind that vv 6-8 emphasize the deliberate and voluntary character of Jesus' acts: he did not consider his equality with God as something to take advantage of for his own benefit, but rather he purposely self-emptied and self-humbled himself. Along the same lines, Jesus' obedience has to be understood as an intentional act. He freely chose the path of self-abasement and obedience which led him to death on a cross. In this sense, his crucifixion can be seen, as it were, as a dramatic and forceful climax of Jesus' kenotic way.<sup>278</sup> O'Brien underlines indeed that the central concern of this passage is to show what obedience meant for Jesus, not for us, that is, "it meant condescension, humiliation, death, and finally exaltation."<sup>279</sup> Therefore, Jesus – the one who is equal with God – shows that God is love and that this love is fully and primarily revealed through self-emptying and self-sacrificial love.

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<sup>277</sup> See Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 165–66.

<sup>278</sup> See Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 83.

<sup>279</sup> See O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 232.

These three key expressions – *μορφὴ θεοῦ/μορφὴ δούλου*, *αρπαγμον*, and *εκενωσεν* – along with the general theological standpoint of the text, have led many scholars to inquire about the biblical background and the parallels of Philippians 2:5-11 with other Old Testament passages. Accordingly, it has been said that Paul is intentionally connecting the letter with either the figure of the Servant of YHWH (Is 52:13–53:12),<sup>280</sup> or the figure of the righteous sufferer of wisdom literature,<sup>281</sup> or that he is establishing a parallel – as he does in other passages such as Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15 – between Adam and Christ. As to the reference to the figure of the righteous sufferer – namely, those who having suffered human violence because of their obedience to God, are eventually exalted by God – it is said that Phil 2:6-11 presents Jesus as the full realisation of the figure of the persecuted just person. Nonetheless, most scholars think that while the thematic linkage between Philippians 2 and the righteous sufferer of wisdom literature can be rightly asserted, it is merely a generic link with no strong literary and linguistic foundation. As to the alleged parallel with the servant of YHWH (Is 52:13–53:12), it is widely accepted that this passage exhibits the same biblical theme of abasement/exaltation – though some dismiss the direct linguistic and literary connection – and therefore provides a suitable background to interpret Phil 2: 5-11 and Paul’s intent with it. This association with Deutero-Isaiah is strengthened by the second part of Philippians (vv 9-11) when it is said, in direct relation to Is 45:23, that Jesus is granted the name above all names, and that every knee

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<sup>280</sup> For a summary presentation of the alleged literary dependence of Ph. 2:6-11 on Old Testament passages, see André Feuillet, “L’Hymne Christologique de l’Epître Aux Philippiens (II, 6-11),” *Revue Biblique* 72 (1965): 352–80. For an analysis of the influence of Is. 52,13–53,12 over Ph. 2 :6-11 see, for instance, Guy Wagner, “Le Scandale de La Croix Expliqué Par Le Chant Du Serviteur d’Es. 53. Réflexion Sur Ph. 2/6-11,” *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 61, no. 2 (1986): 177–87; and especially, Franco Manzi, “La Dipendenza Letteraria Diretta Di Fil. 2,5-11 Da Is. 52,13-53,12,” *Rivista Biblica* 47, no. 3 (1999): 277–360.

<sup>281</sup> See, for instance, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Christological Anthropology in Phil., II,6-11,” *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976): 25–50.

shall bend at the name Jesus has received, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord.<sup>282</sup> Richard Bauckham indeed thinks that the allusions to Isaiah 52--53 and to Isaiah 45 within Philippians cohere. He believes that Phil 2:6-11 reads Deutero-Isaiah “to mean that the career of the servant of the Lord, his suffering, humiliation, death, and exaltation, is the way in which the sovereignty of the one true God comes to be acknowledged by all.”<sup>283</sup> Finally, the association of Philippians 2 with the Pauline Adam/Christ parallelism is again widely accepted as a general background that helps in the understanding of the theological meaning of Paul’s text, though some dismiss any direct linguistic and literary relationship between Philippians and Genesis. I will later explore this parallelism inasmuch as it is the most promising and suitable for shedding light on the theological understanding of the *imago Dei* through the lens of Jesus’ *kenosis*. To sum up, Philippians 2:5-11 evokes several Old Testament passages and themes, with which it is closely related and in some cases directly influenced by. These passages and themes help in understanding not only the biblical background of Phil 2, but also its theological scope and meaning.

### ***The second part of the text***

Before exploring further the Adam/Christ typology in Philippians 2, it is important to underline some key elements of the second part of the text (vv 9-11) as a way of concluding my analysis. Once again, I do not aim to present an exhaustive exegesis of these verses, but rather to highlight only those elements which are relevant to this project and provide some insights

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<sup>282</sup> See, for instance, O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 241; Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 223, and Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 172.

<sup>283</sup> Richard Bauckham, “The Worship of Jesus in Philippians 2:9-11,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 136. The author develops the same idea in Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified. Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 45–53.

for deepening our interpretation of Jesus' *kenosis*, and therefore for a suitable understanding of the *imago Dei*.

First, the beginning of v 9 sets a direct correlation between what has happened and what it is about to occur. The Greek expression *διὸ καὶ* is indeed translated as *therefore* or *that is why*, and introduces the reaction of God the Father vis-à-vis Jesus' steady self-abasement to the extent of his death on a cross. This implies that what vv 9-11 tell about God the Father is directly related to the path of self-abasement followed by Jesus, especially since this path has included voluntary obedience. As Aletti points out, it is not that Jesus has chosen abasement in order to be exalted – it is not a utilitarian or interested choice – but it is rather because he has emptied himself, taken the form of a slave, and been obedient unto his death on a cross, that God the Father has exalted him.<sup>284</sup> Therefore, while the first part of the text has Jesus as the subject of all the actions described in these verses (vv 6-8), the second part (vv 9-11) introduces God the Father as the subject of all the actions, and Jesus becomes the recipient of them; he receives the name above all names, and every knee and every tongue proclaim that he is the Lord to the glory of God. The same way that the text emphasizes the deliberate character of Jesus' acts, his exaltation has to be seen as a free act of God the Father. The Father indeed is not bound to any specific response regarding Jesus' self-humbling life and death. God does not act therefore out of obligation, but rather out of love and faithfulness to the promise, that the one who humbles oneself shall be exalted. Accordingly, the exaltation of Jesus is widely understood as a "response of vindication and approval."<sup>285</sup> Jesus' exaltation is the affirmation,

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<sup>284</sup> See Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 167.

<sup>285</sup> See O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 234. The same idea is found in other authors; see, for instance, Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 220, and Fowl, *Philippians*, 101.

by God the Father, that Jesus' self-emptying and self-humbling path is really "the revelation of the divine love in action."<sup>286</sup> The Father acknowledges that Jesus' *kenosis* is the true understanding and expression of divine equality. Precisely because Jesus did not understand equality with God as either 'snatching' or 'grabbing,' or consider this equality as something to take advantage of for his own benefit, but rather emptied himself to the extent of death on a cross, the Father has exalted him. Scholars widely agree on considering the Greek verb *ὑπερψυχωσεν* (to highly exalt) to refer to something superlative – and not merely comparative in regard to Jesus previous condition – which is in direct contrast to the supreme humiliation of Jesus' crucifixion, and implies that "nothing is higher than Christ Jesus, who is placed over all things and is given the name above every name."<sup>287</sup>

Secondly, the name that Jesus has been granted is the name of *κυριος* which is the Greek designation used in the LXX to represent the personal name of the God of Israel, that is, *Yahweh*.<sup>288</sup> Once again, the text resonates and evokes Deutero-Isaiah where God states that "I am the lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other" (42:8). Accordingly, the sharing of the name implies that in his exalted state Jesus exercises universal lordship. Nonetheless, as the text asserts, the universal recognition of Jesus' lordship is for the glory of God the Father, for "Christ's lordship does not compete with God's sovereignty."<sup>289</sup> Jesus, who has never lost or divested himself from his divine condition, receives now from God the Father the highest glory. This is the great paradox of the text, as Alleti notes, that Jesus Christ, who by renouncing use of his equality with God for his own benefit, has emptied himself, has taken the form of a slave,

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<sup>286</sup> Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," 346.

<sup>287</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 236.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>289</sup> Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 85.

humbling himself and being obedient to death on a cross, now is to be acknowledged and proclaimed as Lord by everyone.<sup>290</sup>

Finally, the second part of the text declares that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord. As mentioned, in clear parallel with Isaiah 45:23, Paul announces universal acknowledgment and proclamation of Jesus' lordship over all creation. The bending of the knee implies homage and recognition of authority. Martin shows, for instance, that "the universal homage marks the subjection of those who so kneel to the lordship of Christ."<sup>291</sup> In this sense, through his exaltation God the Father "has transferred this right to obeisance to the Son."<sup>292</sup> As to the universal proclamation of Jesus' lordship, it should not be understood as a fully religious conversion, meaning universal faith and adherence to Jesus; rather, as O'Brien shows, it signifies that every tongue "will openly declare that Jesus alone has the right to rule."<sup>293</sup> The expression "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" of these verses has to be understood as pointing to everything. Paul is using an expression capable of encompassing every creature, in order to affirm that "nothing in creation is outside of the realm of Jesus' lordship."<sup>294</sup>

To sum up, God the Father has freely exalted Jesus Christ, not as a mere reward for his deeds, but as a vindication and approval of his understanding of divine equality, as well as of his constant "downward mobility" – not taking advantage of this equality for his own gain – which has been expressed in his *kenosis*, choosing the form of slave, humbling himself and being obedient to the point of death on a cross. This is why the Father has given him the name above

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<sup>290</sup> Aletti, *Saint Paul, Epître Aux Philippiens*, 174.

<sup>291</sup> Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 265.

<sup>292</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 224.

<sup>293</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 250.

<sup>294</sup> Thurston and Ryan, *Sacra Pagina*, 84.

all names: Lord, before which every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all creation.

**c. The Adam-Christ parallelism**

After highlighting some key elements of the second part of Phil 2:5-11, I turn now – as a way of concluding the exegesis of the text – to the idea that in this passage Paul is contrasting Jesus Christ with Adam. Despite the fact that this alleged parallel has been dismissed on linguistic basis by some exegetes, it is nevertheless widely accepted by other scholars who clearly see the Adam/Christ contrast as a background of Phil 2.<sup>295</sup>

The Adam/Christ parallel has been interpreted in many different ways ranging from the assertion of a close linguistic and literary parallelism between Philippians 2 and Genesis to a more general and merely thematic connection between these two texts. Nonetheless, for the sake of this project, it is sufficient enough to conceive of the Adam/Christ theme in Philippians 2 in terms of an “allusion”<sup>296</sup> or an “example of the phenomenon of multiple ‘intertextual echo.’”<sup>297</sup> I agree with N.T. Wright that the undoubted presence of Adam Christology in Philippians 2 does not mean that Adam and Christ must be parallel in every way, and that this

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<sup>295</sup> For a brief presentation of the *status quaestionis*, see O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 263–268, and Charles A. Wanamaker, “Philippians 2.6–11: Son of God or Adamic Christology?,” *New Testament Studies* 33, no. 2 (April 1987): 179–193. For some authors who uphold the Adam Christology background of Philippians 2, see, for instance, Murphy-O’Connor, “Christological Anthropology in Phil., II,6-11” and Morna D. Hooker, “Philippians 2:6–11,” in *Jesus Und Paulus. Festschrift Für Werner Georg Kümmel Zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Gräber (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 151–64, and Brendan Byrne, “A Pauline Complement to Laudato Si’,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (June 2016): 308–27.

<sup>296</sup> This is the notion used by J.D.G. Dunn who strongly advocates for the Adam-Christology in Philippians. See, for instance, James D.G. Dunn, “Christ, Adam, and Preexistence,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 74–83, and James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 281–88.

<sup>297</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 58.

association does not exhaust the whole meaning and scope of this passage.<sup>298</sup> Therefore, drawing especially upon the work of Belgian exegete André Wénin, I intend to show how this Adam/Christology sheds light on the theological understanding of Jesus' *kenosis*, and consequently on what the *imago Dei* means for humanity.<sup>299</sup>

The starting point is the dynamic character of the *imago Dei* asserted by Genesis 1. According to Wénin the text presents humanity as an unfinished creation, which ultimately requires human commitment and cooperation to be fully achieved. The absence of the expression "God saw that it was good" after the creation of human beings – which is the literary mark of completeness – and the plural form of v 26 – let us make humankind in our image – are signs both of the incomplete character of humanity, and the calling that human beings receive from God to participate in their fulfillment. Therefore, the *imago Dei* in humanity is not something static, given once and for all, but it is rather a dynamic reality, whose progressive imprinting is taking place in the interpersonal relationship of human beings with God, as well as with the rest of creation. Having been created in the image of God, humanity is invited to progressively become in God's likeness.

Wénin asserts that, according to Genesis 1, human beings are called to fulfill the image of the Creator in the way they exercise their power vis-à-vis the rest of creation. In this sense, their dominion over other creatures must be necessarily oriented toward the life and flourishing of the latter. Not only because the mandate of having dominion is preceded by a blessing which aims at the flourishing of life, but also because humanity is called to control its

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<sup>298</sup> See Ibid., 88.

<sup>299</sup> See Wénin, *La Bible ou la Violence Surmontée*, 17–134; André Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain : Lecture de Genèse 1,1-12,4* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 17–130; and Elena Di Pede and André Wénin, "Le Christ Jésus et L'humain de l'Eden. L'hymne Aux Philippiens (2,6-11) et Le Début de La Genèse," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 43, no. 2 (2012): 225–41.

power, inasmuch as it is invited to exercise the latter as God does, who also sets a limit to God's power, for instance, when resting on the seventh day.<sup>300</sup> The limit of human power is symbolically represented by the vegetable diet that God assigns to human beings. This suggests that humanity may perform the task of subduing and having dominion over animals without producing any harm to them, in fact, like God who has organized the universe and made life appear with the non-violent power of God's performative word, and without destroying anything. What is at stake therefore is the human capacity to be faithful to a distinctive way of exercising power, which both acknowledges some limits and is able to respect life and the place of animals within creation. Humanity is invited to acknowledge and make room for otherness as God does in creating. Wénin thinks that Genesis 1 hence raises the question of how human beings are going to respond to this invitation, which directly affects not only their own future – their becoming in the likeness of God – but also the future of animals.

Genesis 2–3 tells how the story follows and how human beings have responded to God's invitation. Genesis 2 introduces another dietary limit to humanity (vv 16–17), which is necessary for life's flourishing, and shows that life is not about avid and jealous possession.<sup>301</sup> This new limit places human beings before a choice: they either can trust God's word and believe that God cares for and desires the fulfillment of humanity, or they can disobey God's invitation and transgress the limit in order, as the serpent asserts, to become like God. The text shows that instead of having dominion over the animals, human beings decide to follow the

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<sup>300</sup> In order to characterize the way God exercises power, Wénin uses the notion of *maîtrise maîtrisée* which can be roughly translated as “controlled power.” He asserts as well that, according to Genesis 1, power is not the only feature of God, but also *douceur* which conveys at once the meaning of gentleness, sweetness, softness and smoothness. Human beings are called therefore to exercise their power with *douceur*. See, for instance, Wénin, *L'homme biblique*, 29–43, and Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain*, 41.

<sup>301</sup> Di Pede and Wénin, “Le Christ Jésus et L’humain de l’Eden. L’hymne Aux Philippiens (2,6-11) et Le Début de La Genèse,” 233.

serpent's advice, which will be in the end a source of misfortune and not of life. The serpent distorts the truth in two ways. It attracts the attention of human beings only toward the limit set by God and not toward the bountiful gift they have received – you may freely eat of every tree of the garden v 16. And it also interprets the limit as a sign that God wants to keep humanity in subjection preventing them from becoming equal to God. As a result, God becomes the rival of humanity, the one who ultimately threatens with death in order to keep what is seen as divine privilege. In this sense, Wénin thinks that it is not surprising that the transgression described by Genesis is an act of taking and eating, which is ultimately an act of grabbing something in order to use it for one's own exclusive benefit.<sup>302</sup> However, snatching the fruit like booty, wanting to become like God, does not lead humanity to real life. It is a sign that humanity has succumbed to the serpent's temptation, seeing equality with God as something to be snatched or grabbed, rather than to be received from God. Beneath this transgression, the "logic of greed"<sup>303</sup> is at work.

It is at this point that the parallel between Adam and Jesus becomes manifest. Philippians asserts that Jesus Christ does not fall into the trap of considering God as a rival, but rather being faithful to his understanding of equality with God, and without using this equality for his own benefit, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave. He might have regarded his equality with God as "snatching" or "grabbing," or as something to take advantage of for his

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<sup>302</sup> Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain*, 104.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 97–108. For Wénin the logic of greed occurs when desire – incapable of accepting the limits that shape it – takes a bad turn. Like the serpent, greed draws one's attention only to what is lacking due to the imposed limit; as a result, everything else that one has, loses interest. Like the serpent, greed plays on the appearances of good and evil: it makes one believe that by ceding to greed, namely, by grabbing and using goods for one's sole benefit, one will avoid the frustrations imposed by limits, and will eventually find personal wellbeing. Like the serpent, greed entails that everyone who sets a limit is seen as an opponent; it presses one to distrust his or her intentions, which must certainly be bad (if he or she deprives me, it is to keep everything for him or herself). Greed sees limits just as a source of annoyance and frustration. See Ibid., 103.

own gain, but instead he understood it as meaning the way of self-giving, and so acted accordingly. Therefore, Jesus Christ reveals and embodies the true image of God, and we can recognize in him what most properly and truly characterizes God: the gift. In fact, the first chapters of Genesis do not depict God as someone who grabs and jealously keeps things, but on the contrary, God is at the service of the living because they are God's beloved creatures, and bestows on humanity part of God's power and authority within creation. In line with his *kenosis* and taking on the form of a slave, Jesus Christ further humbled himself, and was obedient to death on a cross.<sup>304</sup> He also differs in this respect from Adam, who distrusts both God's word and caring love, and disobeys looking to become like God. In this sense, following James D.G. Dunn, N.T. Wright asserts that Jesus Christ faces the same archetypal choice that confronted Adam.<sup>305</sup>

The second part of Philippians 2:5-11 confirms the parallel between Jesus Christ and Adam. Because the former does not conceive of his equality with God as "grabbing" or as something to take advantage of for his own benefit, God the Father has exalted him, and has granted him the name above all names. What Adam tries to grasp by an act of selfish possession, Jesus receives gratuitously for his understanding and embodiment of God's true image. Thus, if the vocation of human beings is to become like God, namely, to fulfill in themselves the image of God, then what is said about Jesus in Philippians 2 – and not Adam's

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<sup>304</sup> Jesus Christ's humiliation and obedience are rightly associated with the Old Testament figure of the Servant of YHWH. Feuillet thinks that this double reference is not surprising, for the union and mutual reinforcement of two references - one from the Torah and another from the Prophets - is totally consistent with Jewish tradition. See Feuillet, "L'Hymne Christologique de l'Epître Aux Philippiens (II, 6-11)," 366.

<sup>305</sup> See Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 88. It is worth noting that, since Wright thinks that the first part of Phil 2:5-11 refers to the pre-existent Logos, he sees Jesus' incarnation as part of the parallel between Jesus and Adam: "Adam, in arrogance, thought to become like God; Christ, in humility, became human"; and "The temptation of Christ was not to snatch at a forbidden equality with God, but to cling to his rights and thereby opt out of the task allotted to him, that he should undo the results of Adam's snatching." Ibid., 91 and 92 respectively.

behavior – shows the way to their authentic fulfillment.<sup>306</sup> The universal recognition of Jesus' lordship announced by the text – every knee shall bow and every tongue shall proclaim – is a sign that the exaltation of Jesus entails the renewal and fulfillment of the whole of creation. This is once again in sharp contrast with Adam, whose transgression has led all creatures to misfortune (Gen 3:14-19). Precisely because Jesus neither distrusts nor competes with God – nor takes advantage of his equality with God – but rather empties himself and is obedient to the point of death on a cross, he allows God to recognize in him God's true image, and therefore allows God to do what fathers do with their sons, namely, to give him God's own name: Lord.<sup>307</sup> Wénin thinks indeed that this is exactly the meaning of the last phrase of the text: to the glory of God the Father. Paternity is what truly conveys who God is, and Jesus has allowed God to be known as Father. This is God's glory.<sup>308</sup>

In summary, through his downward movement – *kenosis*, *μορφή δουλού*, humility and obedience – Jesus displays the true image of God.<sup>309</sup> Now exalted he exhibits the actual dignity of the one who chose the form of slave; the one who conversely to Adam, did not conceive of his equality with God as meaning “grabbing” nor as something to take advantage of for his own benefit. As a result, the whole of creation - every knee and every tongue - pays homage to him, since he has enabled God to be known as what God truly is, namely Father, and therefore he

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<sup>306</sup> See Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain*, 238.

<sup>307</sup> See André Wénin, *Pas seulement de pain...violence et alliance dans la Bible* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 95.

<sup>308</sup> Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain*, 239.

<sup>309</sup> Fee, among others, is in tune with this idea: “... we are still dealing with the character of God, as that has been revealed in the ‘mindset’ and resulting activity of the Son of God. The concern is with divine selflessness: God is not an acquisitive being, grasping and seizing, but self-giving for the sake of others”; and speaking about the *μορφή δουλού* he says that “from Paul’s perspective this is how divine love manifests itself in its most characteristic and profuse expression.” See Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 211.

has received the name above all names: Lord, because God has recognized in him God's image fully accomplished.

#### ***d. Conclusions***

After having proposed an interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11, I now aim to sum up some conclusions that are important for understanding *kenosis*, and therefore that shed light on the notion of *imago Dei* and its implications for humanity. First of all, the exegesis that I have proposed is in line with the ethical interpretation of this passage, which is endorsed by a majority of scholars. Paul presents Jesus Christ to the Philippians as a role model to be followed.<sup>310</sup> What is said about Jesus Christ is in direct connection with the previous verses (vv 3-4), in which Paul asks the community of Philippi to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, and encourages each of them to look not for their own interests, but to the interests of others. Nonetheless, as Hurtado asserts, this is not to say that Paul is merely promoting a sort of “naïve ethical idealism,” or that he is suggesting simplistically that “all that a Christian has to do is to follow in the Master’s footsteps.”<sup>311</sup> Paul is not pointing to an extrinsic role model, which has to be imitated – by the exercise of mere willpower – but rather he is stressing the

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<sup>310</sup> The other important approach to this text is the kerygmatic interpretation, which has been especially supported by Käsemann and Martin. The kerygmatic interpretation assumes the pre-Pauline origin of the text. While Käsemann asserts that it has a Gnostic-myth background, Martin believes that it is an ancient hymn used in the context of Christian liturgy. The center of gravity of the text is not Jesus as an example for Philippians – this is clearly not Paul’s intent – but rather Jesus’ Lordship over the entire creation. The hymn therefore tells a cosmic soteriological drama, which ends up with Jesus’ enthronement as Lord of all creation. The text proclaims the universal implications of his salvific action, and how all cosmic powers have been subjected to Christ. In this sense, Philippians 2:5-11 does not invite Christians to imitate Jesus, but rather, it reminds them that they have been rescued by Christ - everything is indeed under his governance - and hence that their behavior must befit those who are in Christ Jesus. See Ernst Käsemann, “Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11,” *Journal for Theology and the Church* 5 (1968): 45–88, and Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*. For a thorough discussion of Käsemann’s article see, for instance, Robert Morgan, “Incarnation, Myth, and Theology: Ernst Käsemann’s Interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 43–73. For a brief discussion of both the ethical and the kerygmatic interpretation see O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 253–62.

<sup>311</sup> See Hurtado, “Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11,” 125.

inner transformation that occurs in those who are being conformed to Jesus Christ's image.<sup>312</sup>

Therefore, Philippians are called to see in Jesus not only the basis of their behavior but also its pattern and direction. Accordingly, they are invited to conform to Jesus' pattern of humble self-giving, and obedience, not just as a moral general appeal, but on the basis of Jesus' actual authority and power, as Lord of all creation, which entails the gift of the Spirit as the power that makes this possible. The fact that the Father has both approved and vindicated Jesus' *kenosis*, and self-giving love, makes of Jesus an authoritative example of service – the Lordly example as Hurtado asserts – to Philippians and by extension to all people. It is crucial to acknowledge the paraenetic character of the text – Paul presenting Jesus as a pattern of behavior – in order to perceive and draw out all its anthropological implications.

Secondly, Philippians 2:5-11 conceives of Jesus' attitude and existence in a twofold movement of contraction and expansion, so to speak. On the one hand, Jesus does not consider his equality with God as meaning “grabbing” or “snatching,” nor does he see it as something to take advantage of for his own benefit. Therefore, it can be said that Jesus deliberately chooses a path of self-limitation, which implies the renunciation in his earthly life of privileges and honor to which he had every right.<sup>313</sup> Indeed, by taking the *μορφὴ δουλοῦ*, he freely assumes the place of a person with no advantages, rights or privileges, without claiming any special treatment. This is certainly what the imagery of slave connotes in Paul's context. On the other hand, and contrary to the standard picture of oriental despots, Philippians asserts that divine

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<sup>312</sup> Dahl thinks therefore that “it would be better to speak of *conformatas* and not *imitatio* because of later connotations of the term.” See Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church: Essays* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1976), 34.

<sup>313</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that Phil 2:5-11 is constantly and rightly associated with 2 Cor. 8:9: “for you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

equality did not mean for Jesus Christ “getting,” but rather “giving,” which is properly expressed in self-giving love.<sup>314</sup> Jesus Christ *εκενωσεν* himself – he poured out himself – and humbled himself for the sake of others. This is the other side of the twofold movement presented by Philippians. Jesus Christ has manifested the form of God by taking the form of a slave, and in so doing he has revealed not only what He is truly like, but also what it means to be God.<sup>315</sup> In this sense, by his self-giving and self-emptying love, Jesus reveals that “God is not a grasping, self-centered being.”<sup>316</sup>

I am aware that using the expression of self-limitation calls for some clarification. I intend by no means to endorse the viewpoint, which asserts that Christ has divested himself at the incarnation of some non-essential or relative divine attributes or properties such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. I agree with scholars who hold this to be a wrong understanding of Jesus’ *kenosis*, which assumes that the verb *εκενωσεν* requires a direct object, namely, something Jesus would have divested himself of. However, Jesus does not give up anything of his divine condition, but rather he pours himself out through self-giving love, exactly indeed as an expression of his equality with God. Therefore, the expression of self-limitation does not point to the loss of any divine property, but rather to the actual renunciation of privileges and rights that the act of taking the form of slave entails for Jesus. It does not have to do with the renunciation of something he already had – divine properties – but rather to the renunciation of something that he could have claimed as his, but he did not. For he did not take advantage of his equality with God for his own benefit, and hence this

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<sup>314</sup> Wright, “Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11,” 345.

<sup>315</sup> See O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 216.

<sup>316</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2010), 101.

implies an actual act of self-limitation.<sup>317</sup> The other clarification about this language is that Jesus opts for this self-limitation freely. It is not that he is primarily confronted by an extrinsic limit imposed on him by reality or people, a limit hence that restricts Jesus' liberty, preventing him from doing what he would like to do. It is rather a limit that is freely both established and assumed. In this sense, although he could have taken advantage of his equality with God for his own gain – and therefore he could have claimed rights, privileges, and special treatment – he deliberately poured out himself in self-giving love, taking the *μορφὴν δούλου*, humbling himself and being obedient to the extent of death on a cross. This downward mobility assumed by Jesus is directly related to his understanding of divine equality. God is not “acquisitive,” and Jesus’ behavior and attitude have been the appropriate expression of what divine love is. The exaltation of Jesus – hence the approval and vindication by the Father of his *kenosis* and self-humbling pathway – confirms this as the true understanding and embodiment of divine equality.

Finally, the last important conclusion from the exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11 for the understanding of the *imago Dei* is that Jesus’ *kenosis* not only has revealed God’s true nature, but it has also disclosed what being created in the image of God, and bearing God’s likeness mean for humanity. Along the same lines, Fee asserts that, in the context of Philippians 2:5-11, to be created in God’s image means to take the role of the slave for the sake of others.<sup>318</sup> The parallel between Adam and Jesus has shown that when confronted by the same archetypal choice, it is Jesus – and not Adam – who has embodied the true image of God through his self-

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<sup>317</sup> It is worth noting that the Gospels explicitly show that Jesus is confronted at times with the possibility of using divine equality for his own benefit. See, for instance, Luke 4:1-12 (and parallels), John 6:30, Matthew 26:52-54, Mark 15:31-32 (and parallels).

<sup>318</sup> See Fee, *Philippians*, 214.

humbling path, and has allowed the Father to acknowledge, approve, and vindicate this distinctive way of understanding divine equality. Jesus Christ has been exalted and has been given the name above all names – Lord – inasmuch as He has made manifest that God is not acquisitive, and that divine equality does not mean “getting” or “grabbing,” but rather “giving.” In this sense, the twofold movement of Jesus’ *kenosis* – self-limitation and self-giving – elucidates what the notion of *imago Dei* implies for humanity. Unlike Adam who tries to take advantage of his place within creation for his own gain, and tries to snatch equality with God, Jesus reveals the true image of God precisely because He freely refuses to use his equality with God for his own benefit, but on the contrary *εκενωσεν* and humbles himself, taking the form of a slave, and is obedient to the point of death on a cross. Being created in the image of God therefore implies the necessity for humanity to partake of a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. Human beings are being conformed and renewed in the image of God inasmuch as they allow the Spirit of God to draw them into this twofold movement. This perspective is consistent with the Pauline use of the *imago Dei*, which asserts both that Jesus Christ is the true image of God, and that humanity is being progressively transformed or renewed in God’s image. The only way through which human beings can be the image of God is by becoming the image of Christ, who is the true image of God.

Understanding the *imago Dei* through the lens of *kenosis* fulfills the requirements raised at the end of the first chapter, in order to be theologically fruitful in its capacity to voice the place and role of human beings within creation. Furthermore, understood as *kenosis* the notion of *imago Dei* is able to portray humanity at once in its relationship with God and other creatures, as well as also disclosing something about divine agency, and the *telos* toward which

the whole of creation is led by God. Moreover, it evinces both the dynamic and performative character of the image. Thus, the image is not only susceptible of being renewed – this is what Christ has accomplished – but it also entails consequences for humanity in its relationship with other creatures.

We have seen how the notion of *kenosis* not only effectively intertwines the substantialist, relational, and functionalist interpretations of the *imago Dei*, but also serves as a specifier for them, insofar as it gives them concrete content and practical orientation for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. First, the notion of *kenosis* highlights the ontological character of the image, which affects humanity in its full bodily and spiritual unity. The image therefore is neither something extrinsic nor accessory to human beings, but rather essential for them. Like Jesus' *kenosis*, it expresses what they really are. Nonetheless, the *imago Dei* should not be reduced to some human attribute, capacity, or quality, such as reason or will. In this sense, the notion of *kenosis* specifies the substantialist approach to the *imago Dei*, insofar as it makes clear that *imago Dei* refers not to a distinctive human capacity or attribute, but rather to a mode of existence. Just as Jesus' *kenosis* affects his entire life in all its dimensions, *imago Dei* understood as *kenosis* implies that human beings are called to empty themselves through the twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love for the sake of others.

Secondly, the notion of *kenosis* serves as a specifier for the relational interpretation of the *imago Dei* insofar as it defines the twofold movement that must characterize and govern the relationship of humanity not only with God but also with other creatures. Jesus' *kenosis* is essentially relational, inasmuch as it involves both Jesus' obedience to the Father, and a

distinctive way of relating to others through his self-humbling path and the taking on the *μορφὴ δούλου*. In the same way, understood as *kenosis*, the *imago Dei* means that human relationships with God, other humans, and other creatures, must necessarily be established through the twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. Self-limitation means that human beings should not aim to take advantage of their place within creation for their own benefit by “getting” or “snatching;” but following the example of Jesus they should understand their place within creation as an opportunity for ‘giving.’ Self-giving love means that human beings are called to pour out themselves (*εκενωσεν*) even to the point of losing some alleged privileges and rights, for the sake of others and the rest of creation.

Finally, the functionalist interpretation of the *imago Dei* is also specified by the notion of *kenosis* inasmuch as the latter discloses something crucial about divine agency. According to the functionalist understanding of the *imago Dei*, humanity acts as a representative of God on the earth insofar as it is invited to partake of God’s power and rule over the earth. Human beings participate in the divine governance, but they can never displace it. They exert a delegated authority which must imitate its source in the way it is exercised. Therefore, given that Jesus reveals the true image of God through his *kenosis* and his downward mobility – *μορφὴ δούλου*, self-humility and obedience – human beings must understand and embody their participation in God’s rule over creation in the same way. Therefore, the notion of *kenosis*, in its twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love, provides not only a suitable way for connecting the three classical understandings of the *imago Dei*, but also the specific and distinctive content which enables theology to specify them. It is in this sense that the notion of

*imago Dei*, defined as *kenosis*, can stimulate us in our discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life in the context of the current ecological crisis.

## **2. Systematic Perspectives on *Kenosis***

The exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11 has provided us with an understanding of the notion of *kenosis* as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. Jesus empties himself and takes the form of a slave assuming the status of a person with no advantages, rights or privileges. He does not understand his equality with God as something to take advantage of for his own benefit – in fact, he does not claim any special treatment – and through a downward mobility, so to speak, he reveals that God is not an acquisitive being and that self-giving love is the true embodiment of God's power and dominion. The notion of *kenosis* – understood as self-limitation and self-giving love – has also been used in systematic theology in order to characterize divine agency and the way God relates to creation, inasmuch as God is seen as the one who leads and empowers creation toward its final transformation and fulfillment. The notion of *kenosis* thus is now taken from its distinctive Christological setting, and is applied to the theme of creation, in order to disclose something about how God interacts with all creatures, not only in their origin - *creatio ex nihilo* - but also in their current journey toward fulfillment (*creatio continua*). Over the last decades, some theologians have been exploring the theme of divine causality, in dialogue with the scientific account of the story of the universe and life. It is in this context that the notion of *kenosis* has been taken up by some scholars as a suitable and useful notion in the effort to characterize God's agency and God's relationship with creation.

I turn now, therefore, to the use of the notion of *kenosis* in systematic theology. In doing so, I do not aim for an exhaustive review of all the authors who have drawn on this notion to expound their understanding of God's agency and the way God relates to creation. I rather intend to show that this notion provides both a suitable and a promising framework, which has enabled theologians to explore and account for the active presence of God within creation, not only as the origin of everything, but also as the one who currently guides creation toward its final transformation and fulfillment. To do this I will illustrate, mainly through two examples, how this notion – understood as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love – has been used by Jürgen Moltmann and Denis Edwards to give an account of divine agency within creation. While the first has explored in different books and articles the link between theology and ecological issues, the latter has been instrumental in the development of ecotheology. As might be expected, the same diversity of interpretations that we encountered in the exegesis of Phil 2:5-11, is found in the use of the notion of *kenosis* in systematic theology. Authors certainly do not exactly concur in the way they use this notion for characterizing divine causality. Therefore, in choosing Moltmann and Edwards, I also intend to display some of these differences and distinctive nuances. The main goal of this section is to show that the notion of *kenosis*, inasmuch as it discloses primarily something crucial about God's agency within creation,<sup>319</sup> can then be considered as a legitimate anthropological notion,

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<sup>319</sup> It is worth noting that in applying the notion of *kenosis* to the theme of creation – as some scholars do – I am not arguing that there would be *kenotic* natural processes – characterized therefore by self-limitation and self-giving – which science can identify and describe, but rather that *kenosis* is a theological notion that can be used meaningfully for referring to both the relationship between God and creation, as well as the implications of this relationship for the latter. As Rolston asserts “there is a sense in which there can no more be self-emptying in nature than there can be selfishness. Both are equally mistaken, projecting human possibilities onto a nature incapable of either.” See Holmes Rolston, “Kenosis and Nature,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 43–65, at 61.

which conveys a meaningful and timely understanding of the *imago Dei*. The way in which God relates to creation – assuming the unavoidable limits that theological language faces when talking about God – is crucial for getting an accurate and significant theological understanding of the *imago Dei*, in which humanity has been created and is progressively conformed through the Spirit.

**a. Jürgen Moltmann: zimzum, the Sabbath of Creation, and the Spirit of Life**

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann draws on the notion of *kenosis* in his attempt to renew the theological account of creation, and the image of God as Creator.<sup>320</sup> He aims to provide a theological framework able to connect the work of theology with current ecological challenges. He asserts indeed that theology has contributed to the ecological crisis – not primarily as many believe because of its alleged anthropocentric view of creation rooted in the Bible – but rather to the extent that it has supported a system that fosters human dominion vis-à-vis creation, which has at its roots the image of a distant and almighty God, namely, monarchical monotheism. He thinks that Renaissance thought and Nominalism offered a new picture of God that highlights one-sidedly God's power and sovereignty over creation. Accordingly, “God is almighty, and *potentia absoluta* is the pre-eminent attribute of his divinity. Consequently God's image on earth, the human being (which in actual practice meant the male) has to strive for power and domination so that he might acquire his divinity.”<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> For a good account of Moltmann's theology see Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, *The Kingdom and the Power: The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecology in Jürgen Moltmann's Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); and, Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1995).

<sup>321</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 26–27.

Therefore, Moltmann proposes a shift in the theology of creation, which can be summarized basically in two main points. On the one hand, he believes that theology must overcome the image of the world as a machine – a closed self-sufficient system, governed by laws established by an external and powerful god – by showing that the universe is an open system, and by asserting the relational character of every creature. The mechanistic view of the world ignores that things are inherently constituted by their relationships. According to Moltmann, every living thing reflects in its own specific way the Trinitarian mutual interpenetration – *perichoresis* – to the extent that they live “in one another and with one another, from one another and for one another.”<sup>322</sup> He proposes a social understanding of the Trinity, as it models the interaction within creation, as a suitable starting point for a theology that counters the mechanistic view of the world, and is able to reawaken and restore in human beings a sense of the community of creation. On the other hand, Moltmann thinks that the mechanistic picture of creation and its one-sided stress on God’s transcendence “put an end to all ideas about God’s immanence.”<sup>323</sup> Therefore, theology should take the indwelling Spirit in Creation as its starting point, if it wants to depict correctly the God/creation relationship. The world is in God, and God dwells in the world. Theology must emphasize a Trinitarian understanding of creation, rather than one that neglects the role of the Spirit and the Son within it. One can emphasize that the real distinction between God and creation does not entail a separation or competition but real immanence of God in creation. In this sense, Moltmann considers that panentheism is the most suitable framework for portraying the way creation

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 318.

relates to God.<sup>324</sup> An unbalanced emphasis on God's transcendence leads to deism, whereas a one-sided accent on God's immanence leads to pantheism. Unlike these approaches, the Trinitarian concept of creation manages to affirm altogether God's intimacy and difference with the world. For "in the panentheistic view, God, having created the world, also dwells in it, and conversely the world which he has created exists in him."<sup>325</sup>

It is therefore in the process of revising the theology of creation that Moltmann draws on the notion of *kenosis*, understood not only as self-limitation, but also as self-giving love. This notion enables theology to affirm and combine at once both God's transcendence and God's immanence. Starting from Christology – and from what *kenosis* has meant for Jesus Christ – Moltmann asks about the possible interpretation and meaning of the notion of *kenosis* not only for the act of creation, but also for the way in which God relates and is present to every creature. In this sense, he shows that the idea of *kenosis*, when introduced into the theology of creation – *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* – implies that God's transcendence can be described especially by an act of self-limitation in order to make room for creation, and that God's immanence is characterized by the indwelling of the Spirit in creation, who is present to all creatures through self-giving love.

The idea of God's self-limitation – as an expression of *kenosis* – appears in three different ways in Moltmann's thought. First of all, it is through the notion of *zimzum*, which Moltmann takes from Jewish mysticism, in order to explain the theological notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. Moltmann draws on the work of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish writer Isaac Luria, interpreted

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<sup>324</sup> He asserts, for instance, that "by taking up panentheistic ideas from the Jewish and the Christian traditions, we shall try to think ecologically about God, man and the world in their relationships and indwelling." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1981), 19.

<sup>325</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 98.

through the well-known expert in Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem.<sup>326</sup> The notion of *zimzum* is traditionally understood as concentration and contraction, and it was used in relation to the Jewish doctrine of the *Shekinah* – namely, the dwelling or settling of the divine presence on earth – which affirms that the infinite God can contract God’s presence in order to dwell in the temple. Luria applied this notion to the relationship between God and creation, and consequently its meaning is enlarged by incorporating the idea of retreat or withdrawal. In the Kabbala of Luria’s school, *zimzum* is hence better understood not as the concentration of God at a point, but rather as God’s retreat *away* from a point.<sup>327</sup> It is by an act of self-limitation or self-withdrawal that God concedes the necessary space for the existence of creation. As Moltmann asserts “it is only God’s withdrawal into himself which gives that *nihil* the space in which God then becomes creatively active (...) God creates the world by letting his world become and be in *himself*: let it be!”<sup>328</sup> Moltmann believes that this is a meaningful way – if not the only way – of conceiving an *extra Deum*. Theologians indeed customarily make the distinction between God’s “inward” and God’s “outward,” without necessarily asking the critical question about how a realm outside an omnipresent God can be conceived at all. The notion of *zimzum* – self-limitation or self-withdrawal of God – therefore enables theology to reconcile the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* with God’s divinity without contradiction, and without falling into the pitfalls of pantheist emanationism. Moltmann states that God’s self-limitation can be seen, first

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<sup>326</sup> For a good presentation of Luria’s thought see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd Edition (New York: Schocken, 1967), 244–86. For Moltmann’s use of the notion of *zimzum* see Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 79–93; *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 105–119; “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 137–51; and *Science and Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), chap. IV and VIII. Moltmann draws on the notion of *kenosis* also in Jürgen Moltmann, “God Is Unselfish Love,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 116–24.

<sup>327</sup> See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 260.

<sup>328</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 109.

of all, in God's self-determination to be the Creator of a non-divine world, inasmuch as "out of his infinite possibilities God realizes this particular one, and renounces all others."<sup>329</sup> God's self-determination to be the Creator implies hence an act of self-limitation; indeed it is "self-determination for the purpose of self-limitation."<sup>330</sup> Nevertheless, the most important aspect of God's self-limitation is disclosed through the idea of God's self-withdrawal in order to make room for creation. Moltmann thinks that this idea points to a necessary correction in the theology of creation, for "God does not create merely by calling something into existence, or by setting something afoot. In a more profound sense he 'creates' by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself."<sup>331</sup> It is worth noting that Moltmann is aware of the limits of this kind of talking about God, insofar as he clearly asserts both that it is metaphoric language<sup>332</sup> and that he does not follow all the speculations in natural philosophy that develop out of the idea of God's self-withdrawal.<sup>333</sup> Aware of the problems that this language about God raises, Moltmann believes however that the notion of *zimzum* is a useful intellectual tool in order to think of *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>334</sup> In the next section of this chapter I will address some of the main critiques that the idea of God's self-limitation – *zimzum* – has received. For the moment, let us keep in mind that Moltmann states that the creation of a world not divine is connected with a kenotic self-limitation on God's part.

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<sup>329</sup> Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," 145.

<sup>330</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 111.

<sup>331</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 88.

<sup>332</sup> Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," 146.

<sup>333</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 110.

<sup>334</sup> Moltmann has been also criticized for using selectively Jewish material, without taking into account all the nuances and implications of the notions and images that he takes from Jewish mysticism. For some, this would be the case with the idea of *zimzum*. See, for instance, Deane-Drummond, *Ecology in Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, 205, 206, and 225; and "A Critique of Jürgen Moltmann's Green Theology," *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 554–65.

In addition to using the notion of *zimzum* in order to think theologically of *creatio ex nihilo*, Moltmann also draws on the idea of God's self-limitation to conceive of the way in which God relates to creation and guides it toward its fulfillment (*creatio continua*). In this sense, he underscores primarily the notion of patience and the idea of a non-interventionist divine agency. Accordingly, Moltmann asserts that "God acts in the history of nature and human beings through his patient and silent presence, by way of which he gives those he has created space to unfold, time to develop, and power for their own movement."<sup>335</sup> In the same way as God has freely embodied an act of self-withdrawal in order to concede the necessary space for creation, God accompanies and guides creation toward its final transformation, making room and allowing creatures to unfold. Nonetheless, this is not to say that God is not involved in creation, but rather to acknowledge that, what is truly almighty is God's love, and that patience and giving space to those who are loved, are some of the main features of real love. Waiting, therefore, is not a sign of disinterested passivity, but on the contrary, it is the highest form of interest in the other, inasmuch as waiting implies expecting, inviting, alluring, and enticing, as well as giving space and time to others in order to allow them to unfold and flourish. God's *kenosis* – self-limitation – in the creation and preservation of all creatures points toward that "future which we trace out with the symbols of the Kingdom of God and the new creation, or 'world without end.'"<sup>336</sup>

Closely related to the ideas of God's patience, and non-interventionist divine agency, Moltmann draws on the notion of God's self-limitation in a third way, namely, through the image of the Sabbath as the crown of creation. The whole of creation points to the Sabbath

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<sup>335</sup> Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," 149.

<sup>336</sup> Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 67.

that exhibits God's being. While God's works express the divine will, the Sabbath renders manifest God's existence within the world. This image of the Sabbath, according to Moltmann, evokes three major ideas. First of all, it reminds us that creation has an open future which looks to its completion. The biblical account of creation shows indeed that "only the Sabbath of creation is more than 'very good;' it is 'hallowed,' 'sanctified,' and therefore points to creation's future glory."<sup>337</sup> In the Sabbath the consummation of the world is celebrated in anticipation. Secondly, the Sabbath is one of the two archetypal images of liberation that Israel has offered to the world – the other one is the Exodus. While the Sabbath is the symbol of inner liberty, rest and quietude, the Exodus is the symbol of external freedom. Accordingly, Moltmann asserts that "no political, social and economic exodus from oppression, degradation and exploitation really leads to the liberty of a humane world without the Sabbath, without the relinquishment of all works, without the serenity that finds rest in the presence of God."<sup>338</sup> In this sense, Christianity should understand its feast-day as an extension of the Jewish Sabbath, and in relation with the Kingdom of God that is the messianic fulfillment of the Israelite longing for completion. Finally, the Sabbath reminds us that God accompanies creation to its consummation "by letting be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself."<sup>339</sup> The Sabbath conveys the idea of God's self-limitation or self-withdrawal to the extent that it is connected with God's presence/absence and not with his action within creation. To sum up, Moltmann moves away from both the mechanistic view of the world and the monarchical deistic picture of God, in order to properly combine and express God's transcendence and immanence. He thinks

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<sup>337</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 264.

<sup>338</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 287. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the idea of *zimzum* is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought of. It could come to be considered as an exile of God into God-self. See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 261.

<sup>339</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 88.

that the idea of *kenosis* – understood as self-limitation or self-withdrawal – is a meaningful theological way of conceiving of God's transcendence, which he explores through the notions of *zimzum*, a non-interventionist divine agency, and the image of the Sabbath as the crown of creation.

However, Moltmann is concerned not only with the theological understanding of God's transcendence, but also with God's immanence. In order to think of the latter he asserts that the notion of *kenosis* alludes also to self-giving love. He even speaks of a *kenosis* of the Spirit inasmuch as the Spirit – who is Godself – indwells in creation as the giver of life.<sup>340</sup> Indeed, the operations of the Spirit, which are life-giving and life-affirming, can be recognized in everything that ministers to life and resists its destruction.<sup>341</sup> The Spirit is present in the world and immanent in each individual system, and this is why the work of the Spirit can be described not only through the notions of “making,” “preserving,” “maintaining” and “perfecting,” but also through the ideas of “indwelling,” “sympathizing,” “participating,” “accompanying,” “enduring,” “glorifying,” which according to Moltmann describe “a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings.”<sup>342</sup> Therefore, in addition to portraying divine agency within creation as patience and making room for creatures – which underline God's self-limitation and self-withdrawal – Moltmann also thinks of God's action vis-à-vis God's creatures as self-giving love – the Spirit as live-giving – that leads creation toward its completion. As an open system, creation is therefore guided by the Spirit through patient love, which not only makes room for creatures to unfold, but also empowers them to self-transcend themselves

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<sup>340</sup> See Ibid., 102.

<sup>341</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>342</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 14.

toward their fulfillment. The history of creation hence can be grasped only as “interplay between God’s transcendence in relation to the world, and his immanence in that world.”<sup>343</sup>

The notion of *kenosis* enables Moltmann to give a meaningful theological account of both of them.

**b. Denis Edwards: non-interventionist divine agency and self-emptying love**

The work of Australian theologian Denis Edwards is another contemporary example of the use of the notion of self-emptying love – understood as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving – in order to characterize divine agency within creation.<sup>344</sup> Edwards believes that Jesus’ incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection disclose the meaning and scope of God’s power. Indeed, the Christ-event must be the paradigm for understanding divine causality within the world; for the “self-emptying love of Christ reveals what is at the heart of God. Self-emptying love is found to be characteristic of divine action.”<sup>345</sup> In this sense, God’s power is not just any kind of neutral power, but it has to be understood as power-in-love,<sup>346</sup> as has been eminently shown in Jesus’ *kenosis*. Self-emptying love is therefore what truly

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 206. Pointing to this interplay between God’s transcendence and immanence, Moltmann asserts that “God cedes – God creates; God makes room – God calls into existence; God makes new – God allows a dwelling place beside him; God gives out from himself – God takes into himself.” Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 120.

<sup>344</sup> See, for instance, Denis Edwards, “Climate Change and the Theology of Karl Rahner,” in *Confronting the Climate Crisis. Catholic Theological Perspectives*, ed. Jame Schaefer (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2011), 233–52; *Creation, Humanity, Community: Building a New Theology* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1992); “Evolution and the God of Mutual Friendship,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 10, no. 2 (June 1, 1997): 187–200; “Exploring How God Acts,” in *God, Grace and Creation: College Theology Society Annual Volume*, ed. Philip J. Rossi (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 124–45; *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); “Lord and Life-Giver: Spirit Today,” *Concilium*, no. 4 (2011): 13–22; “Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution: A Dialogue with Rahner on Noninterventionist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 67, no. 4 (2006): 816–33; “Resurrection of the Body and Transformation of the Universe in the Theology of Karl Rahner,” *Philosophy & Theology* 18, no. 2 (2006): 357–83; *Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution, and Ecology* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2014), 74–115; Edwards, *Breath of Life*; and, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*.

<sup>345</sup> Edwards, *How God Acts*, 31.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 50 and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 39–42.

characterizes divine agency within creation; and this love is embodied, according to Edwards, through both self-limitation and self-giving.

The first feature of God's action within the world thus is self-limitation. Edwards refers to this aspect of divine agency especially when trying to harmonize God's care for creation and divine providence, on the one hand, with some disturbing elements of natural processes such as violence, predation, and suffering – which seem to directly contradict God's love, and care for creatures – on the other hand. Redefining divine power as self-limitation is vital for theologically grasping why God does not suppress natural selection, destruction, and oppression in both natural evolution and social processes. According to Edwards, therefore, theology must underline that one of the principal marks of divine causality within creation is self-limitation. For, "God accepts the limits of physical processes and of human freedom. The theology of incarnation and the theology of the cross point to a God of unthinkable vulnerability and self-limitation."<sup>347</sup> Edwards is certainly aware that this approach does not remove the ambiguity which characterizes natural and social processes, but believes that it nevertheless provides a meaningful framework to conceive theologically and simultaneously of God's providence for creation, and the undeniable presence of violence and suffering in nature and society. At the heart of Edward's approach lies the notion of a non-interventionist divine power, which means that God "does not intervene in the sense of acting to break into creation from outside, and God is not to be thought of as violating or undermining the laws of nature."<sup>348</sup> God freely accepts and respects the limits of finite processes and entities. Edwards assumes the distinction made by Aquinas between primary and secondary causality, and asserts

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<sup>347</sup> Edwards, "Evolution and the God of Mutual Friendship," 196.

<sup>348</sup> Edwards, *How God Acts*, 47.

that God really comes to us, responds to us and provides for us only through secondary causes. Therefore, God's self-emptying love necessarily involves a letting-be of the other – a making-room for the other – in order to respect and not compromise the proper autonomy and integrity of the creature.<sup>349</sup> Self-limitation is therefore a crucial aspect of divine agency within creation.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that God is an aloof monarch, so to speak, who does not interact with creation. Acting through secondary causes does not mean that God is distant from and does not care for creation. Edwards thus elaborates on the second feature of God's action in the world, which is self-giving love. He does so basically through the notion of the Spirit as life-giver, who empowers creatures and leads creation toward its fulfillment. Indeed, at the heart of the cosmological and evolutionary story there is the Spirit, who accompanies and sustains all creatures in their journey toward completion. In order to describe the presence of the Spirit in the ongoing process of creation, Edwards draws on two key concepts of Karl Rahner's, namely creaturely self-transcendence and divine self-bestowal, and asserts that "it is God's self-bestowal that enables and empowers creaturely self-transcendence," and that this act of God "that enables evolutionary emergence can be understood (...) through the indwelling, life-giving Spirit."<sup>350</sup> Critical to this approach hence is the understanding of the

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<sup>349</sup> See Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 107.

<sup>350</sup> Edwards, "Exploring How God Acts," 126. The interplay of the notions of God's self-bestowal and creation's active self-transcendence indeed enables Rahner to engage coherently the history of the cosmos with both its continuity and discontinuity. Matter has evolved in the direction of life and of humanity, and history has reached its climax and goal in the Incarnation. God's self-communication enables creaturely self-transcendence, which points toward the fullness of God's life. Accordingly, divine agency does not cancel the autonomy and agency of creatures, but on the contrary, God empowers all creatures so they may achieve a really active self-transcendence. By virtue of God's self-communication, God has become the innermost life of the world, however without belonging to the essence of creatures, as if they were divine. Through this notion of self-transcendence, Rahner aims to articulate God's immanence and transcendence vis-à-vis creation in a way that avoids the problems of

relationship between God and creatures in a non-competitive way – God is never in competition with creation and God's power does not cancel the agency of creatures – but rather on the contrary, it is precisely divine love which “enables the flourishing of the integrity of natural processes and human freedom.”<sup>351</sup> God's self-emptying love is thus what allows evolutionary emergence as well as creaturely autonomy, inasmuch as God's self-bestowal “is not only the goal of creation but also that which moves creation from within to the goal.”<sup>352</sup> In this sense, God's creative act must be construed not only as sustaining the universe in its existence, but also as enabling it to become.

This perspective entails that the power of the Spirit, which maintains the integrity of creatures and enables them to flourish and develop, has to be understood as immanent. Edwards believes, along with many other theologians, that Trinitarian *panentheism* is the most suitable way to think of the relationship between God and the world, which implies that the Spirit is portrayed as “‘making space’ within the divine relational life for a relational world to

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classical theism and pantheism. The transcendent God has become the immanent life of the world, empowering it to transcend itself. God is the ground, support, and goal of this movement of self-transcendence. Rahner defines this type of divine action as quasi-formal causality, which refers thus to divine agency within creation resulting in a development which can legitimately be said to have come from the creature. God is always at work from within creation, and divine causality should not be seen as an intervention from without. The more creation approaches the goal of its self-achievement – which is God – the more its agency increases. The active self-transcendence of creatures implies a real change into something more, under the dynamism of the divine being and under the continuous divine creative power. Rahner insists that true becoming implies this essential transformation. Although the active self-transcendence of creatures cannot be perceived by science, it has to be affirmed by theology, if the latter wants to deal seriously with the unfolding process of creation. See, for instance, Karl Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 157–92; “Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 273–89; “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XXI (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 16–55; “The Secret of Life,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 141–52; “The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of the ‘New Earth,’” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 260–72; “The Unity of the Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 153–77; and, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 178–203.

<sup>351</sup> Edwards, *How God Acts*, 50.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 42.

evolve.”<sup>353</sup> However, the Spirit is not a physical force or any kind of vitalism, which could be detected by science. The Spirit is the hidden dynamism involved in the origin of the whole universe, in its unfolding present, and in its open future. According to Edwards “the role of the Spirit with each creature is a relational and personal one. The Spirit of God creates a relation between each creature and the divine perichoretic communion that enables a creature to be and to become.”<sup>354</sup> Thus, the work of the Spirit is described as this ability to relate with all creatures in a compassionate, self-limiting love that empowers them, and respects their autonomy. Edwards sometimes uses the image of the midwife in order to describe the role of the Spirit, who is therefore that force from within through which all things will be made new.<sup>355</sup> Theology cannot fully describe how this future will be, but it can assert that “that all things will be transfigured as they participate in the divine communion in their specific and differentiated ways.”<sup>356</sup> Edwards believes that the way in which God relates to creation can be portrayed through different images, namely: “a painter at work on a canvas, a metaphor unfolding in the mind of a poet, a gardener developing a beautiful landscape, a host preparing a meal for friends.”<sup>357</sup> All these images convey both the exploratory character of the work, and the opportunities and limitations that the given materials entail. Thus, it is God’s self-bestowal – through the indwelling life-giving Spirit – that enables creaturely self-transcendence toward its fulfillment, respecting its autonomy and integrity. To sum up, therefore, Edwards, on the one hand, asserts that by creating in love God freely accepts limitations, and respects the freedom and integrity of creation, and on the other hand, God not only sustains all creatures in their

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<sup>353</sup> Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 130.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>355</sup> See, for instance, Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 45, and, *Breath of Life*, 107.

<sup>356</sup> Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 112.

<sup>357</sup> Edwards, “Evolution and the God of Mutual Friendship,” 199.

existence, but also elicits and enables their self-transcendence toward their completion. God's love empowers creation, and leads it toward its final transformation. Thus, God's self-emptying love is embodied in a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving.

### **c. Conclusions**

Using the works of Moltmann and Edwards, have shown that the notion of *kenosis* when used in systematic theology can be understood as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving. Along with many other theologians, they think that this notion is not only legitimate, but also suitable and fruitful for characterizing divine agency within creation. Building on my exposition of *kenosis* in Philippians, I now draw some general conclusions that are important for systematic theology as it understands how God relates to creatures, and can shed light on the notion of *imago Dei* and its implications for humanity.

The first conclusion is that the understanding of *kenosis* through the lens of Christology should be the normative theological understanding of this notion. Indeed, the way in which systematic theology conceives of the idea of self-emptying love must be necessarily informed by the Christological discussion of it, not as an optional resource, but rather as its starting point and foundation. It is Jesus who has revealed God's true nature, and also how divine agency within creation must be rightly portrayed. Accordingly, when used in other theological domains, such as the theology of creation, the notion of *kenosis* must keep its connection with Christology, from which it receives its deepest and proper meaning. Both Moltmann and Edwards, for instance, acknowledge the primacy of the Christological approach to what self-emptying love means, and only then do they use this understanding to theologically explore how God the Father and the Spirit relate to creation.

It is worth noting that not all theological reflections have taken this path, and some, mainly inspired by the dialogue between theology and the scientific account of both the story of the universe and life in the world, have drawn on the idea of *kenosis* in order to describe divine agency without reading it through the hermeneutical lens of Christology.<sup>358</sup> As a result, God's power and God's love are mistakenly seen as counterpoised and needing to be mutually tempered, as if God were omnipotent on the one hand, and merciful and loving on the other, and were constantly deciding whether to act out of power or out of love. Furthermore, in a certain sense, God's freedom and love are thought of as being in competition with both human freedom and creation's autonomy, as though it were necessary that God move out of the way in order to allow all creatures and, especially, humanity to flourish. Therefore, in this perspective God ends up being just another cause among other causes within the world. This is why it is wrongly asserted that the notion of *kenosis* implies that God needs to restrict Godself, and surrender, even if partially, some of God's main attributes. This confusion stems from philosophical and scientific perspectives that neglect the Christological focus on the notion of *kenosis*. For, when read accurately through the lens of Christology, *kenosis* does not convey any loss of divine properties, or that God's power and love are mutually exclusive opposites.<sup>359</sup> On

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<sup>358</sup> See, for instance, John Polkinghorne, ed., "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 90–106.

<sup>359</sup> Sarah Coakley shows well how decisions about the theological starting point when reflecting on the notion of *kenosis* vitally affect the way human freedom, God's power, and creation's integrity are portrayed. Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 192–210. For other examples of the use of the notion of *kenosis* in systematic theology, each one with particular theological starting points, presuppositions, and consequences, see, for instance, John Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Second Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007); Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming -- Natural, Divine and Human*, enlarged edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1993); and "The Cost of New Life," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 21–42; George Ellis and Nancey Murphy, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996); George Ellis, "Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J.

the contrary, it is shown that what is really almighty is God's love, because God is power-in-love, and this love does not threaten but rather is precisely what enables creatures to unfold and self-transcend toward their fulfillment.<sup>360</sup> Therefore, the Christological understanding of *kenosis* has to be the normative understanding, which governs all other theological uses of this notion.

The second conclusion is that *kenosis* in systematic theology is understood as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving. This is directly related to the Christological meaning of it, which has been taken from the exegesis of Phil 2:5-11. The interpretation of this passage has shown that Jesus does not consider his equality with God as meaning "grabbing" or "snatching," seeing it as something to take advantage of for his own benefit; hence we can say that he freely chooses a path of self-limitation, which entails the renunciation in his earthly life of honor and privileges to which he had every right. The kenotic movement of self-limitation is seen in systematic theology mainly as God's act of making room for creation and letting creatures be. This supposes that God freely accepts and respects the limits of natural processes and entities. The movement of self-limitation is theologically conceived as a non-interventionist divine agency. Accordingly, the notions of patience and waiting are brought to the fore in order to characterize the way in which God relates to creation. God's self-limitation is understood as

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C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 107–26; Ian G. Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature, and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002); and "God's Power: A Process View," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 1–20.

<sup>360</sup> The work of Herbert McCabe offers another example of the theological assertion that God should not be thought of as jeopardizing human freedom or competing with it. Drawing on Saint Thomas, McCabe states that transcendence does not mean absence, distance or disinterest, and that God's transcendence is not inversely proportional to God's immanence vis-a-vis the world. God is not a member of everything but he is in everything that happens and everything that exists in the universe. In this sense, God is not an alternative to freedom but its source and cause. See, for instance, Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 2–51; *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 3–12; and *Faith Within Reason* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 48–93.

a manifestation and expression of God's love, which is indeed power-in-love. This is not to say that God needs to get out of the way in order to allow creatures to unfold and flourish, without overwhelming them. It is rather to assert that one of the most remarkable features of love – in which a path of self-limitation can be identified – is that it makes room for what is loved, and lets it be, respecting its autonomy and integrity. Therefore, God's *kenosis* does not mean that God needs to restrict God's power in order not to nullify creatures, but rather it means that precisely because God loves creation – indeed God is power-in-love – a stance of self-limitation vis-à-vis creatures can be meaningfully asserted of God, on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, as mentioned, God's self-limitation or self-withdrawal does not mean that God is absent from or uninvolved in the past, present, and future of creation. On the contrary, and this is the second movement of *kenosis*, God is the innermost principle of reality, which enables creatures not only to exist, but also to become and self-transcend toward their fulfillment. The images of the Spirit as life-giver and midwife are just two ways of expressing God's empowering action within creation, which is the result of God's self-bestowal. The *kenosis* of God in a theology of creation cannot mean that God is distant from or disinterested. On the contrary, it means that in self-emptying love, God cares for creation and leads it toward its completion. God's self-bestowal not only sustains creation, but also moves it from within toward its final transformation. We can say therefore that God's self-limitation is a legitimate theological notion, only in relation to God's self-emptying love, which empowers all creatures, and allows them to become. *kenosis* thus reveals something crucial for theological understanding of divine agency.

Finally, the last important conclusion from the use of *kenosis* in systematic theology is that it sheds new light on the theological meaning of the *imago Dei*, serving as a specifier for the three classical understandings of it, namely, substantialist, relational, and functional. If we want to understand what *imago Dei* really means, the first and most important theological question is: who is this God who has created creatures in God's own image? Accordingly, what discloses who God is and what God does is potentially crucial for pinning down the meaning and content of the theological understanding of what being created in the image of God means for humanity. When applied to the theology of creation, the notion of *kenosis* offers a meaningful and inspiring understanding of the *imago Dei* as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. In this sense, being created in the image of God means for human beings, first of all, that they are called to make room for other creatures, and allow them to be and flourish. Because they find their origin ultimately in self-emptying love, they are invited to relate to creation as God does, respecting otherness and empowering it by love. Thus human beings as *imago Dei* must empty and limit themselves, not in the sense of losing or restricting their capacities, but rather and properly in the sense of fully embodying self-emptying love, which not only respects limits and makes room for otherness, but also engages in life-giving relationships that desire other's well-being. Humanity must understand its power as power-in-love – *maîtrise maîtrisée* and *douceur* – which points to empowering others and enabling all creatures to move toward their fulfillment. Therefore, the twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving, inasmuch as it expresses and embodies true self-emptying love, is crucial for the theological understanding of the *imago Dei* and its consequences for humanity.

The notion of *kenosis* – when applied to the theology of creation – also serves as a specifier for the three classical understandings of the *imago Dei*. First of all, *kenosis* specifies the substantialist approach to the *imago Dei* insofar as it makes manifest that the fact that human beings are God's image-bearers refers to a mode of existence, namely, self-emptying love, which affects humanity in all its dimensions. In this sense, the comprehensive character of the image is acknowledged, inasmuch as it is not reduced to any distinctive human capacity or attribute. Secondly, the use of *kenosis* – for characterizing divine agency – specifies the relational interpretation of the *imago Dei*, insofar as it defines the twofold movement that must both orient and govern the relationship of humanity not only with God, but also with other creatures. The kind of relationship that humanity is called to establish with God and other creatures is clearly described as one that makes room for otherness, and gives life in order to enable others to flourish. Finally, the functionalist interpretation of the *imago Dei* is also specified by the use of *kenosis* in systematic theology, inasmuch as the latter discloses something crucial about divine agency, and therefore illuminates the way in which humanity must act as representative of God on earth. The power and role that humanity receives from God must be exercised as power-in-love, which not only freely respects limits, as well as the integrity and autonomy of all forms of life, making room for them, but also establishes life-giving relationships which point ultimately toward other's fulfillment. The notion of *kenosis* therefore – when applied to the theology of creation – provides a suitable framework for connecting the three classical theological understandings of the *imago Dei*, as well as serving them as a specifier. On this way the notion of *imago Dei* defined as *kenosis* can help us discern new pathways of true and fruitful living in the context of the current ecological crisis.

### **3. *Kenosis*: Limits and Strengths of an Image**

Nevertheless, *kenosis* and other notions that express the same pattern of divine self-giving, such as self-sacrifice, have been highly criticized, and their alleged character as revelatory of humanity have been called into question. On the one hand, some feminist theologians have asserted that the pattern of self-emptying and self-abnegation can be quite problematic for women and so is far from helpful as a paradigm. The notion of *kenosis* in this sense can be beneficial only for men in healing their conception of God and power, and their tendency to portray reality in terms of hierarchy and domination.<sup>361</sup> But it by no means shows how theology can empower women, or how it might relate to important feminist values in the understanding of God. On the other hand, understanding *kenosis* as making-room and self-limitation has been criticized for implying that God's freedom and power are in competition with human freedom and creation's autonomy. I have already addressed this latter critique, and shown that it stems mainly from a misunderstanding of the nature of God's self-limitation, which does not entail any loss of divine properties but is rather the expression of real love. Such power-in-love makes room for what is loved, respecting its autonomy and integrity. Nonetheless, the feminist critique of *kenosis* needs to be addressed more carefully because of its anthropological consequences. Therefore, I turn now, in conclusion, to this critique. I will describe its core argument and how some feminist theologians have responded to it by asserting the importance and relevance of *kenosis* in order to speak theologically of women. In doing so, I will show the strengths of this notion as revelatory of humanity.

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<sup>361</sup> See Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, MA, USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), 155.

### *a. Feminist criticism of the notion of kenosis*

Some feminist theologians have argued that *kenosis* as a theological notion for describing and inspiring humanity can have meaning only within the context of patriarchal assumptions.<sup>362</sup> Daphne Hampson, for instance, asserts that Christian tradition has conceived of God throughout history mainly through two models or paradigms, namely, powerfulness and powerlessness. While the former depicts God as powerful, separate, distant and alone, which unsurprisingly concurs with the male structuring of reality, the latter portrays God as becoming powerless through the abnegation of powerfulness.<sup>363</sup> In the paradigm of powerlessness, therefore, theology describes God as divesting Godself of power by means of a self-emptying process or *kenosis*. Hampson thinks that these two models have had an impact not only on how Christianity represents God, but they have also consequently affected the way believers conceive of both themselves and others. She asserts that these two paradigms are rooted in patriarchal assumptions; they have been deeply detrimental for women and are not useful for interpreting their reality. The model of powerlessness, with the consequent notion of *kenosis*, is especially inappropriate for women, inasmuch as a gospel of self-sacrifice has been historically used to justify the position of women, and “may indeed serve as the ‘opium’ of women, reinforcing the position to which a woman has already assigned herself, compounding her belief that ‘one should not put oneself forward’, and feeding a ‘martyr’ complex.”<sup>364</sup> The

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<sup>362</sup> For a presentation of the treatment of the notion of *kenosis* within feminist theology see, for instance, Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1998), 149–209; Jennifer Newsome Martin, “The ‘Whence’ and the ‘Whither’ of Balthasar’s Gendered Theology: Rehabilitating Kenosis for Feminist Theology,” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 211–34; and, Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 41–65.

<sup>363</sup> See Daphne Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 3 (1988): 234–50.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

paradigm of powerlessness and *kenosis* can be seen at best, as a corrective of the male way of dealing with reality which is in terms of power, hierarchy, and domination.

Accordingly, Hampson believes that women need another paradigm not only for interpreting their reality, but also for inspiring their practice, in which *kenosis* has no role to play. She calls this model empowerment, and thinks that it highlights precisely what is not envisaged in the masculine dichotomy of powerfulness and powerlessness, namely, the mutual empowerment of persons.<sup>365</sup> Without significant images in Christian tradition, this paradigm of empowerment enables women to establish a centered self through relations that are open and mutually nurturing, as well as entails a notion of God that does not undermine human integrity and autonomy. On the contrary, God is conceived as the one who “enables us to become what we have it in us to be.”<sup>366</sup> Feminist theology according to Hampson must therefore reject the paradigms of powerfulness and powerlessness in portraying God and interpreting reality. They are embedded in patriarchalist assumptions. By contrast, feminist theology needs to promote, develop, and embody the model of empowerment, which is in tune with feminist values, and decidedly points to the flourishing of women.

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker provide another example of the feminist critique of *kenosis* and other notions that share the same pattern of divine self-giving. In a well-known article, these authors oppose the tendency to glorify suffering that they see within Christian tradition.<sup>367</sup> They identify three distinctive ways in which Christian theology has reflected on the notion of atonement and its significance for believers, namely, the *Christus*

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<sup>365</sup> Daphne Hampson, “Response: Daphne Hampson,” in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK Publishing, 1996), 122.

<sup>366</sup> Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 248.

<sup>367</sup> Joanne C. Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World?,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne C. Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1–30.

*Victor* approach, the satisfaction tradition originally formulated by Anselm, and the moral influence tradition which began with Abelard. Brown and Parker consider that these three theological traditions are flawed inasmuch as they grant redemptive value to suffering. Consequently, believers would be exhorted to imitate Jesus' willingness to accept and undergo the suffering which is inflicted upon them because of its salvific character. Despite the fact that each of these three theological traditions thinks of the theological meaning of Jesus' cross in a distinctive way, the resulting message is the same, namely, the glorification of suffering. The *Christus Victor* tradition downplays, so to speak, the magnitude and even reality of suffering insofar as it presents it as a necessary step to a new life. So, "God is pictured as working through suffering, pain, and even death to fulfill 'his' divine purpose."<sup>368</sup> The satisfaction approach glorifies suffering as it seems to imply that the disciple's role is to suffer in the place of others in order to liberate them. Finally, the moral influence tradition, by asserting that Jesus, the innocent victim, is the highest proof of God's mercy and love toward humanity, legitimizes the victimization of some in view of the conversion or edification of others.

According to Brown and Parker, despite the fact that theologians have challenged and revised these three classical atonement theories over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have failed to provide a theological view of Jesus' cross that decidedly denies any redemptive character of suffering, as they ultimately maintained the cross as an image of liberation. Since "suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed,"<sup>369</sup> the authors assert that Christian theology needs a profound revision if its goal is not to justify oppression and glorify suffering, but to liberate believers. Consequently they affirm that Christianity must get rid of any

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 27.

interpretation of Jesus' death that suggests that it has had salvific consequences, and therefore that the suffering of believers and also their self-sacrifice might have through mysterious ways a redemptive character. Jesus did not choose the cross, but rather he chose integrity and faithfulness to justice, radical love, and liberation even in the face of the threat of death. Therefore, according to Brown and Parker, to be a Christian is to opt for the fullness of life challenging every form of injustice and oppression, as well as to remain in faithfulness and integrity toward justice, radical love, and liberation, as Jesus did, even when one is threatened by suffering, violence, and death. In this viewpoint, suffering stems only from those who use their power to resist and oppose the human claim to the fullness of life, and who consequently create and maintain systems of injustice and oppression. This is the way in which suffering – including Jesus' death – must be understood. It has no other theological meaning whatsoever.

Although Parker and Brown do not directly question the notion of *kenosis*, but rather the way in which theology has interpreted suffering and self-sacrifice, their critique also hits this notion, inasmuch as the latter expresses a pattern of divine self-giving that can serve as an inspiration for humanity. Their critique therefore is similar to Hampson's concern, namely, that Christian theology has been a source of oppression and inequality for women. Either through the paradigms of powerlessness and powerlessness that it employs to portray God and to interpret the life of believers, or by means of its understanding of the notion of atonement, theology has not only collaborated with unjust and oppressive systems, especially with patriarchy, but it has provided the theological rationale for their legitimization. The same core argument with distinctive nuances can be found in the work of other feminist theologians.

They concur that *kenosis* is not an appropriate anthropological notion for women, and that it does not offer a suitable framework to interpret their reality.

The feminist critique of the notion of *kenosis* has to be seriously taken into account. It certainly points to what can be considered a true risk for Christian theology. A flawed interpretation of Jesus' cross and death can foster a wrong victimization of believers, and a passive attitude in the face of suffering and inequality. Consequently, the theological pattern of divine self-giving, expressed in the notion of *kenosis*, can be improperly used to legitimize and sustain oppressive and unjust systems. Nonetheless, this critique should not imply that theological notions such as *kenosis*, sacrifice, and self-giving love must be discarded since they do not provide an adequate theological paradigm for women. This feminist criticism thus functions as a corrective for deficient interpretations of these notions. It raises a pertinent red flag that must be thoroughly considered, but that cannot entail the neglect or loss of some important aspects of Christian theology and its vision of humanity. It is in this sense that other voices within feminist theology have responded to this criticism, and have reflected on the fruitfulness and relevancy of these notions for women, when interpreting their reality and inspiring their action. Authors such as Sarah Coakley, Erin Lothes Biviano, and Anna Mercedes have addressed theologically the feminist critique of the paradigm of divine self-giving as an anthropological model, which discloses crucial aspects of humanity and might guide human action within reality. I therefore turn now not only to the way in which these three authors respond to the critique of Hampson, Brown and Parker, but also to the way in which they depict the notions of *kenosis*, sacrifice, and the pattern of self-giving love as pertinent and meaningful

for women. It is worth noting immediately that I concur with the approach of these authors and their effort to show the theological relevance of these notions for women.

British theologian Sarah Coakley deals with feminist criticism of *kenosis* especially by responding to Hampson's post-Christian critique.<sup>370</sup> In her response to Hampson, Coakley raises two main concerns. On the one hand, she thinks that Hampson misconstrues the theological meaning and scope of *kenosis*, and consequently her criticism hits only the way in which modern British kenotic Christology understands this notion and its theological consequences. On the other hand, Coakley perceives in Hampson's approach what she considers to be a long-term danger to Christian feminism, namely, the repression of all forms of vulnerability which results in the failure to theologically confront issues of fragility, suffering or self-emptying (*kenosis*) except in terms of victimology.<sup>371</sup>

Coakley identifies at least six different ways in which *kenosis* has been interpreted throughout tradition, and asserts that only the version of German and British modern kenotic Christology implies a loss or renunciation of divine power. While Hampson's description of *kenosis* as a paradigm of powerlessness that stems from an abnegation of power is in tune with this modern understanding, it is not in tune with the biblical and patristic interpretations of it. The former, in fact, asserts that the incarnation implies that Jesus temporarily or permanently relinquished the divine properties of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence; the latter understandings of *kenosis* do not claim any loss of divine properties or attributes, but rather

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<sup>370</sup> Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, MA, USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 3–39. This article was previously published in "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," in *Swallowing a Fishbone? : Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK Publishing, 1996), 82–111.

<sup>371</sup> See Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," 2002, 33.

portray Jesus either choosing never to have certain forms of power, or revealing the true nature of divine power to be intrinsically humble rather than grasping. Consequently, Hampson's criticism calls into question only a very particular interpretation of *kenosis*.

Coakley thinks that Hampson rightly unveils and opposes the gender overtones and implications of the way in which early twentieth-century British kenoticists, such as Frank Weston, P.T. Forsyth, and Charles Gore, understand *kenosis*. Their thought actually reveals gender stereotypes, which become evident not only through the analogies they use to explicate *kenosis*, but also through the invariable starting point of their analysis of this notion, namely the presumption of possessed power and influence. Nonetheless, Hampson's criticism does not deal with other interpretations of *kenosis*, which according to Coakley are not only compatible with feminism, but are also vital to a "distinctively Christian manifestation of it, a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it.'"<sup>372</sup>

This brings us to the second concern which Coakley raises in reaction to Hampson's criticism. She thinks that Hampson's theological stance not only fails to take into account other understandings of *kenosis* that do not involve any abnegation of power, but also is unable to encompass them, inasmuch as her thought is unfortunately permeated by gender stereotypes. This is why indeed, according to Hampson, the paradigm of powerlessness and the notion of *kenosis* would be helpful only for men as a corrective of the "male" problem of power. While Hampson seems to align all "males" with achieved, worldly power, and women with the lack of it, Coakley does not endorse essentialist and universalizing views that there are fixed "male"

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 4.

and “female” approaches to God, human nature, and power.<sup>373</sup> As a result, Hampson, exactly like modern kenoticists, is unable to consider the possibility of power or strength in vulnerability. Hampson epitomizes in this respect what Coakley believes is a danger for Christian feminism, which is “ultimately the failure to embrace a feminist reconceptualizing of the power of the cross and resurrection.”<sup>374</sup> This latter task is crucial if Christian feminism wants to face and give new expression to the biblical paradox of “losing one’s life in order to save it,” as well as if it wants to exhibit an understanding of the “self” of Christ that transcends gender stereotypes.

Taking on the task of a feminist reframing of power, Coakley advances the notion of “power-in-vulnerability,” which she finds radically expressed and embodied in the “self” of Christ, in whom concurs “non-bullying divine ‘power’ with ‘self-effaced’ humanity.”<sup>375</sup> This notion draws, in Coakley’s thought, on a reading of Chalcedon through the lens of the Christological school of Antioch, and on an interpretation of *kenosis* in which the “emptying” applies to Christ’s human nature rather than to the divine.<sup>376</sup> Coakley thinks that believers can experience this “power-in-vulnerability” especially when they enter into prayer, which is “the unique intersection of vulnerable, ‘non-grasping’ humanity and authentic divine power, itself

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<sup>373</sup> See Ibid., 32 n. 64.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>376</sup> There is no need to further explicate Coakley’s notion of ‘power-in-vulnerability.’ What is relevant for the sake of this dissertation is Coakley’s argument that there are other interpretations of the notion of *kenosis* that do not involve any abnegation of power as Hampson understands it, on the one hand, and her theological exploration of the meaningfulness and relevance of the self-emptying pattern for women. In other writings Coakley has explored and defended the notion of sacrifice – the true passage toward proper ascetical detachment – as not only meaningful for women, but also necessary for a real theonomous selfhood in which freedom is constituted by right dependence on God. Therefore, unlike patriarchal sacrifice that leads to possessiveness, violence and abuse, the sacrifice-for-God brings freedom, union, and peace. See Sarah Coakley, “In Defense of Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac,” in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 17–38.

'made perfect in weakness.'<sup>377</sup> It is in prayer that believers are properly empowered by divine power, as they make space for God to be God.

Erin Lothes Biviano is another theologian who has addressed the feminist criticism of the pattern of self-giving love as meaningful and timely for women.<sup>378</sup> She does so by a retrieval and exploration of the notion of sacrifice as a crucial mark of discipleship for both men and women believers. Sacrifice must be understood as an act that "responds to the encounter of God's grace in Jesus Christ and expresses one's dedication to God through worship and by caring for the neighbor."<sup>379</sup> Accordingly, the core message of the notion of sacrifice within a Christian religious framework is dedication. Lothes Biviano shares feminist concerns about misconstruals of Jesus' cross and death that can lead and have led to passive acceptance of suffering and victimhood. Nonetheless in her view this does not warrant abandoning the Christian notions of sacrifice and *kenosis*. On the contrary, these notions convey something crucial to the Christian message about humanity, which is expressed through the biblical paradox of losing one's life to fully retrieve it.

In fact, Lothes Biviano finds in the notion of *kenosis* an important source and theological foundation for her understanding of sacrifice. Although these notions are not synonyms, they both express a pattern of divine self-giving that may serve as inspiration for human self-giving. Drawing on the work of other theologians such as Arthur Peacocke and John Haught, Lothes Biviano interprets God's creative action as kenotic, and thinks that precisely for this reason it becomes a model for sacrifice. God's self-giving toward creation is a source of new life and

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<sup>377</sup> Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," 2002, 38.

<sup>378</sup> Erin Lothes Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice: The Loss of Self, the Gift of Self* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007).

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 67.

shows that “creativity and self-giving have a natural relationship.”<sup>380</sup> As a result, the creative dimension of Christian sacrifice, its capacity to impact one’s self-realization, is clearly disclosed and highlighted. Sacrifice thus points not only to loss and suffering, but “to the realization of a new and fuller reality or identity by means of self-gift that seeks the well-being of self and other.”<sup>381</sup> Accordingly, the notion of sacrifice is theologically meaningful and relevant not only for men, but also for women, and enables them to interpret their reality and discern their action.

Finally, Lutheran theologian Anna Mercedes provides a third example of how women theologians have responded to the feminist criticism of *kenosis*, and have shown why the pattern of self-giving love is not disempowering for women but is, on the contrary, crucial for their fulfilment.<sup>382</sup> On the one hand, she acknowledges the importance and relevance of the feminist critique of *kenosis* as it has been used to foster passivity in the face of suffering and contributed to women’s oppression. On the other hand, she is convinced that this notion helps believers to voice theologically their self-giving desires, which can be a real source of an authentic assertion of the self, and may trigger particular ways of resisting and confronting abuse. Mercedes’s core argument is that *kenosis* is marked not only by agapeic love but also by *eros* and hence by a self-giving which brings self-satisfaction. Accordingly, “self-giving may be born, not of a lack of self-interest, but of an intensity of it.”<sup>383</sup> In this sense, a self-giving attitude is not always a sign of a self-abnegating life or a capitulation before the abusers. It can rather be the expression of a self-affirming and passionate life that not only challenges oppression

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>382</sup> Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (London--New York: T&T Clark International, 2011).

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 65.

through many strategies of resistance, but also embodies one's deep desires and the pleasure of caring for others.

Drawing on the psychological literature about survivors' strength and resistance even amidst their victimizations, Mercedes' is able to highlight the kenotic tendencies as self-affirming and strengthening in the lives of abuse survivors. She thinks that the theological recognition of the assertiveness and strength of kenotic acts can help people feel their inner power, and may offer abused people a sense of renewed and holy dignity.<sup>384</sup> In this context, Mercedes believes that the feminist critique of *kenosis*, although well-intended, may disempower women whose self-giving attitude is a mark of their own integrity and manifestation of their resistance to oppression. Paradoxically, feminist criticism of *kenosis* can produce more guilt instead of liberation and make women feel responsible for their own suffering. In contrast, the theological assertion of the importance and relevance of *kenosis* can help in recognizing self-giving and care for others as empowering and as an expression of resistance in the face of oppression. All believers can be inspired by this notion, which has the capacity to voice their own desires and help them in asserting their selves.

### ***b. Conclusions***

The notion of *kenosis* is therefore a meaningful and timely anthropological model for women as for men. The work of Coakley, Lothes Biviano, and Mercedes has shown that feminist criticism of this notion, while pointing to the actual risk that it may be used to maintain oppression and suffering, fails to recognize the potential of *kenosis* for empowering women and voicing their deeper desires. It should be clear by now that the feminist critique deals with only

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<sup>384</sup> See Ibid., 124.

one interpretation of *kenosis*, understood as abnegation of power, which is rooted in gender stereotypes. At the same time, by recognizing self-giving only as a nullification of the self in the face of oppression and suffering, this criticism does not take into account the actual power of this pattern to inspire people's lives, trigger strategies of resistance before abuse, and foster dynamics of self-affirmation.<sup>385</sup>

In addition to the response of these three theologians, it can be said that the understanding of *kenosis* advanced by German and British modern kenotic Christology has been clearly dismissed in this project, as it has been proven to be flawed. Furthermore, Hampson's description of the paradigm of empowerment is closely akin to some features of how this dissertation interprets *kenosis*. As a result, her argument works as an invitation to enlarge narrow understandings of *kenosis* and oppose any misuse of it, but it by no means succeeds in theologically substantiating its dismissal. The model of empowerment which she proposes as meaningful and necessary for women is already encompassed by the notion of *kenosis* that reveals God as power-in-love.

Once *kenosis* has been defined from a Christological and systematic perspective as self-limitation and self-giving love, and once the study of the feminist criticism has shown that it is a meaningful anthropological notion for all believers, as a way of concluding this chapter I intend to show some of the strengths of this notion in its understanding of God and in its depiction of humanity. In doing so, I aim to take into account both some of the pending tasks which have been identified within ecotheology, and many necessary connections which have been

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<sup>385</sup> For other authors who hold a similar approach see Susan Wood, "Is Philippians 2:5-11 Incompatible with Feminist Concerns?", *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 172–83, and Ruth Groenhout, "Kenosis and Feminist Theory," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291–312.

suggested by a number of theologians in order to establish a suitable link between ecological sensitivity and theological reflection.

I believe that the notion of *kenosis* offers five major strengths as revelatory of God and therefore of what *imago Dei* means for humanity. First, the interpretation of *imago Dei* as *kenosis* allows for a clear connection between the themes of Creation and Incarnation-Redemption and for a unifying Christian narrative. In this sense, Creation and Incarnation-Redemption are two moments of the single act of God. They are “two moments and phases in the real world of the unique, even though internally differentiated, process of god’s self-renunciation and self-expression into what is other than himself.”<sup>386</sup> By assuming the perspective of the Scotist school, the classical narrative of the Christian faith can be enriched. While the latter stresses the fall and understands the Incarnation principally in relation to it, the former emphasizes God’s self-communication as the primordial goal of divine activity. As a result of this, the history of the universe is always and everywhere a story of salvation.

Second, the *kenotic* perspective of the *imago Dei* allows for a meaningful exploration of divine agency and the way God relates to the whole cosmos. This approach supports a non-interventionist understanding of divine agency, which is more suitable in dealing with themes such as suffering within the evolutionary process. In addition, it permits one to counter the presuppositions of classical theism in its conception of divine power. Divine power is not the sum of all the “omni-attributes” that one can think of; it is, rather, God’s generative and transformative self-emptying love, which is power-in-love.

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<sup>386</sup> Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” 177–78.

As the next chapter will show, this interpretation of *imago Dei* allows for a meaningful exploration of humanity in its different dimensions, and this is its third strength. In this sense, *imago Dei* defines not only the relationship between human beings and other creatures, but is rather meant to inspire a meaningful understanding of the complex relationships among the Creator, humanity and the rest of creatures. The *imago Dei* motif can thereby be used in exploring the personal, social, and environmental aspects of human life, and it can be detached from its narrow understanding as *dominium terrae*. The notion of *kenosis* hence allows for a fruitful exploration of the three ecological dimensions of human existence – personal, social, and environmental – and for visualizing the way in which right relations with oneself, others, other creatures, and God can be established.

This interpretation of *imago Dei* also has clear ethical implications, and this is its fourth strength. Other images such as priest of creation, stewardship, or community of creation, suffer from the same deficiency of ambiguity in their implications. They do not provide clear-cut criteria for discerning paths to a true and fruitful life. Conversely, *kenosis* in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love offers inspiring orientations for embodying ecologically friendly ways of life. Although the ethical implications of *kenosis* as an ecological image will not be fully drawn in this project, there will be some hints of this over the last chapter.

Finally, opting for an understanding of *imago Dei* as *kenosis* allows for a Christological emphasis in its interpretation. This perspective stresses the biblical stance which presents Christ as the true image of God. It follows the conviction of Vatican II that the mystery of humanity is fully revealed only in the mystery of the incarnate Word. The Christological

approach to *imago Dei* unveils new elements in its interpretation and scope. The themes of soteriology and eschatology can be explored in their cosmic resonances.

#### **IV. *Kenosis* as an Ecological Image: A Theological Exploration**

The previous chapter has asserted basically three main points. First, the theological understanding of *imago Dei* throughout history can be grouped into three lines of interpretation, namely, substantialist, relational, and functionalist. These distinctive perspectives should not be seen as watertight compartments or as mutually exclusive, for on the contrary they complement each other, enabling theology to spell out three aspects of what *imago Dei* connotes, which combine the specific nuances of all its biblical occurrences. Despite their different emphases, the recognition of both the dynamic and performative character of the *imago Dei* in humanity is a crucial common trait of these three interpretations. Thus, the image is not only susceptible of being renewed – this is what the Christ-event accomplished – but it also entails consequences for humanity in its relationship with other creatures. Human beings are the image of God on the earth insofar as they are called to share in God's governance and care for creation.

Secondly, when understood in terms of *kenosis*, the *imago Dei* exhibits all its ecological strength, and it shows itself as a timely, meaningful, and sound understanding of humanity for our time. *Kenosis* indeed not only effectively intertwines the substantialist, relational, and functionalist interpretations of the *imago Dei*, but also serves as a specifier for them since it provides them with concrete content and practical orientation for understanding humanity as created in the image of God. Deeply rooted in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (Phil 2:5-11), *kenosis* gives expression to a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. On the one hand, self-limitation neither points to any loss of divine properties nor implies that God has to move out of the way to allow creatures to flourish. It rather means that Jesus freely chooses

the renunciation in his earthly life of honor and privileges to which he had every right, and does not consider his equality with God as something to take advantage of for his own benefit. Moreover, self-limitation also means that God freely accepts and respects the limits of natural processes and entities through a non-interventionist divine agency, making room for creatures and letting them be and flourish. On the other hand, self-giving love asserts that divine equality did not mean for Jesus Christ “getting,” but rather “giving,” as he poured himself out and humbled himself for the sake of others. Furthermore, divine self-giving love means that God is not absent or distant from creation, but rather cares for it and leads it toward its fulfillment. God’s self-bestowal not only sustains creation, but also moves it from within toward its final transformation. Accordingly, *kenosis* is the true manifestation of divine power, which is power-in-love, and involves a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. In this sense, beyond the simplistic “power vs weakness” binary based on the creaturely conception of power and weakness, *kenosis* reveals that real self-giving always involves a kind of limitation, which does not have anything to do with absence, impotence, or non-involvement. Rather, the limitation that self-giving entails is the limitation as faithfulness. In the case of God, this self-limitation stems from Jesus’ own faithfulness to his downward mobility – *kenosis*, *μορφή δούλου*, humility, and obedience – and from God’s own faithfulness to the freedom and flourishing of the free creature, which is at the same time God’s fundamental faithfulness to Godself as self-giving love.

Finally, *kenosis* is a meaningful and timely anthropological model for all human beings with no exception, for it reveals something crucial for a theological understanding of divine agency. Consequently, *imago Dei* interpreted as *kenosis* discloses important features of what

being God's image-bearer means for humanity. Being created in the image of God therefore implies the necessity for humanity to partake of a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. Human beings are being conformed and renewed in the image of God inasmuch as they allow the Spirit of God to draw them into this twofold movement. *Kenosis* defines not only the relationship between human beings and other creatures, but is rather meant to inspire a meaningful understanding of the complex relationships among the Creator, humanity, and the rest of creatures. It allows for a fruitful exploration of the three ecological dimensions of human existence – personal, social, and environmental – and for visualizing the way in which right relations with oneself, others, other creatures, and God can be established. As a result, the dynamic and performative character of the *imago Dei* is well highlighted, and its ethical implications established. Although the move from a broad anthropological model to the specifics of policies and action is always a difficult and complex one, I believe that *kenosis* in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love offers relevant and inspiring orientations for discerning and embodying ecologically friendly ways of life.

Accordingly, in this chapter I turn to *kenosis* as an image revelatory of humanity. The chapter consists in exploring the fruitfulness of this notion and its ability to shed light upon humanity through the three dimensions of ecology characterized in the first chapter, namely, personal, social, and environmental. Indeed, the chapter is structured upon and revolves around these three ecological dimensions. It is thus a constructive theological exploration which shows why and how *kenosis* is a meaningful, sound, and timely interpretation of the *imago Dei* motif, inasmuch as it helps in fostering and sustaining an ecologically friendly understanding of humanity, and provides guidelines in the search for paths to a true and fruitful

life. I will concentrate, first of all, on the personal dimension of ecology. After highlighting the necessity of ecological conversion and a new ethos, I will explore the notions of limit and asceticism as two important anthropological features that *kenosis* offers to personal ecology, and that may inspire us in searching and discerning new ways of life. On the one hand, the notion of limit, which is a constitutive element of humanity, will be defined neither as external restriction, nor as mere physical or moral boundary, but it will be regarded rather as an intrinsic component of all relationships. There is no relationship without limits, for they are an essential instrument for establishing and shaping any relationship. Therefore, the *imago Dei* is deepened in human beings, insofar as they are able to discern, recognize, and respect certain limits, which arise not simply as extrinsic divine interdictions, but that stem rather from their faithfulness due to their common vocation. These limits entail that humanity makes room for other creatures and cares for their integrity and fulfillment. On the other hand, the notion of asceticism will be defined as performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different relationships, and to create a new identity.<sup>387</sup> In this sense, *imago Dei* understood as *kenosis* involves not only an intellectual re-imagination of humanity, which is definitely something needed nowadays, but also and especially new practices and ways of interacting and living. *Kenosis* has to do with embodiment, and requires that humanity abandon certain deeply ingrained ways of life, in order to embrace other modes of existence that are more ecologically friendly. I will show that the notions of limit and asceticism call for a constant discernment conceived as ecological wisdom, which may help us in identifying and keeping the

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<sup>387</sup> See Richard Valantasis, "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 544–52.

limits that are constitutive of relationships that care for others, for their integrity and fulfillment.

Then, in the second part of this chapter, I will explore how *imago Dei* understood as *kenosis* can shed light upon humanity through the lens of the social dimension of ecology. I will address the issue of the images that may help us in our searching for and voicing new ways of social interaction and life. The concept of “civilization of poverty” coined by philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría will be particularly examined. On the one hand, this concept expresses, better than other notions such as “another world is possible,” the dimension of conflict that inevitably is part of the discernment of a new lifestyle, especially within the context of both the consumerist and the throwaway culture. On the other hand, it not only connects explicitly the current social challenges with environmental issues, avoiding a restricted understanding of ecology as just environment, but also provides some clear criteria for the governance of the so-called “global commons,” that dismiss the false dilemma of choosing between caring for nature or caring for those in need. Rooted in the social dimension of ecology, the concept of “civilization of poverty” is in tune with the twofold movement of *kenosis* of self-limitation and self-giving love.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I will explore how *kenosis* can be useful and suitable when reflecting on the role and place of humanity within creation. The notion of stewardship has been especially important in this respect, inasmuch as it has become a sort of default position among many theologians and church authorities for depicting the relationship between humanity and other creatures. Nevertheless, although it has been crucial in linking ecological sensitivity with theological reflection, it has drawbacks as well. After tracing its origins and pondering its advantages and downsides, I will show how *kenosis* both offers a

corrective to the notion of stewardship, and enhances what is already good in it. Inasmuch as *kenosis* in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love entails clear practical consequences, it complements greatly the notion of stewardship. It will thereby be shown how this alliance between these two images heightens what is good in each of them, in order to inspire us in discerning and embodying an ecologically friendly lifestyle.

In summary, in the context of the ecological crisis, the chapter aims to provide a re-imagination of humanity through the notion of *kenosis*. Its main question is what a kenotic anthropology would look like in the face of the current ecological challenges. The chapter intends to both highlight some human features and attitudes, which need to be emphasized nowadays, and revise the way humanity thinks of and establishes its relation with God and other creatures. Without any claim to be exhaustive, I hope to show the fruitfulness and inspiring character of *kenosis* as an anthropological image, which helps theology not only to reframe its intellectual understanding of humanity, but also to discern and propose new ways of life. *Kenosis* therefore helps to shape people's imagination, and the way believers portray and make practical sense of the Christian depiction of humanity.

#### **A) Personal Ecology: Ecological conversion**

As mentioned, the notion of ecology points to the manner in which humans not only conceive of but also embody their way of inhabiting the world. This is why ecology must be understood at least through three interwoven dimensions which mutually affect each other, namely, personal, social, and environmental. These three ecological dimensions are like concentric circles that mutually interact and shape the way in which humanity both portrays and lives its existence upon the earth. Ecological crisis means, therefore, that we are living a

critical moment in which our lifestyle and the values that sustain it are being judged and called into question for their destructive results. It is a crisis inasmuch as we are confronted with the current and future life-threatening scenarios, which can be drawn as unavoidable consequences of human practices and beliefs, and humanity needs therefore to make a decision about it. In doing so, we need not only practical criteria but also inspiring and sound images about human life upon the earth that may enlighten our discernment of pathways to a true and fruitful life. As John of Pergamon puts it, we need “not an ethic, but an ethos. Not a programme, but an attitude and a mentality. Not a legislation, but a culture.”<sup>388</sup>

If the ecological crisis requires both a Christian questioning of beliefs and attitudes that have fostered this crisis, and an ecological reform of Christianity, then the question about what must be revised and changed in the Christian understanding of humanity and its practical implications is crucial. Starting with the personal dimension of ecology, we can explore how *kenosis* helps theology in taking up this task of revision and change, which aims toward a theological anthropology able to inspire ecologically friendly practices, and to reframe especially the relationship between humanity and other creatures.

As defined in the first chapter, personal ecology focuses on the basic subjectification process of every individual and the consequences that that entails for his or her interaction with others and the environment. It refers therefore to the domain of personal interactions of each individual, encompassing the whole array of sustainable and healthy dynamics and ways of living, which nurture the flourishing and fulfillment of human beings. Personal ecology therefore focuses on the primal interaction of every individual with him/herself, and the social

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<sup>388</sup> John Metropolitan of Pergamon, “Preserving God’s Creation,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Elizabeth Breuilly and Martin Palmer (London ; New York: Cassell, 1992), 61.

and environmental consequences that this interaction implies. From a theological standpoint, personal ecology aims toward personal flourishing and fulfillment. Some topics that pertain to the personal dimension of ecology are the way people think of and organize their everyday life, the pace of life, working and leisure time, consumption habits and the discernment of what is necessary for maintenance, the use of space and housing, the choice of means of transportation, and the way people relate to their own bodies. As a result, to raise the question about how *kenosis* may have an impact on the personal dimension of ecology is to ask about how this notion may change the perception we have of ourselves, and the way we think of and perform our role within creation. A change is needed in the manner we grasp and imagine our living on the earth. The ecological crisis is not merely a technological one since, as Conradie asserts, the problem lies not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, in the collective psyche. Hence, what is required hence is a fundamental change of orientation, a *metanoia*.<sup>389</sup>

### **1. Ecological Conversion**

Church authorities and theologians have been increasingly calling for ecological conversion in the last decades. John Paul II asserts, for instance, that we must encourage and support the ecological conversion which has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. According to him, one of the causes of the ecological crisis is that human beings unfortunately are no longer the Creator's stewards, but autonomous despots,

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<sup>389</sup> Conradie, "Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology," 285–86.

who are finally beginning to understand that they must stop at the edge of the abyss.<sup>390</sup>

Humanity has been unfaithful to God's plan toward creation, and has forgotten its task of continuing God's work of life and peace, and ruling the world in righteousness and holiness. This is why ecological conversion implies rediscovering the right place and role of humanity within creation, who exerts a delegated authority that must be in conformity with the Creator's plan.

In a joint statement issued in 2002, John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I insisted again on the importance and necessity for conversion if humanity wants to successfully deal with the current environment challenges. For the problem is not simply economic or technological, but rather moral and spiritual; and we need an inner change of heart, a genuine conversion in Christ, which can lead humanity to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.<sup>391</sup> Again ecological conversion has to do with retrieving the proper place of humanity in creation, and recognizing of failure both to fulfill the mandate of being the Creator's stewards, and to cooperate with God in realizing more and more fully the divine purpose for creation. This is why an act of repentance is needed on the part of humanity.

Pope Francis has also reminded us of the importance of an ecological conversion, asserting that living our vocation of being protectors of God's creation is something essential

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<sup>390</sup> See John Paul II, "General Audience, 17 January 2001," no. 4, accessed May 4, 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010117.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html).

<sup>391</sup> John Paul II and Bartholomew I, "Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I on Environmental Ethics," June 10, 2002, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020610\\_venice-declaration.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html). The Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I has emphasized the need of ecological conversion in different statements and allocutions. See John Chryssavgis, ed., *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

and not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience. The effects of a true and deep encounter with Jesus Christ will necessarily become evident in the way humanity relates to the world.<sup>392</sup> An ecological conversion implies for humanity the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, on the one hand, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light, on the other.<sup>393</sup> Pope Francis affirms that human beings have to recognize that God not only has created the world, but has also written into it an order and dynamism that humanity should not ignore. This is why ecological conversion has to do primarily with the right understanding of the place and role of humanity within creation, and with acting accordingly. What is needed is the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures in building a healthy relationship with creation, and a heartfelt repentance and desire to change.<sup>394</sup> We should not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.<sup>395</sup> What is at stake therefore is how humanity conceives of its vocation and task within creation.

The calling for ecological conversion is therefore directly related to the acknowledgment of the right place of humanity in relationship to God and other creatures. It is eminently an anthropological challenge which requires that humanity revise all that is harmful in its thinking and acting for the flourishing of other creatures, and embrace a new way of portraying its role within creation, and a new ecologically friendly lifestyle. This is not merely a turning toward

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<sup>392</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si' On Care for Our Common Home," no. 217.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., no. 221.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., no. 218.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., no. 220.

nature, “but the awareness of the interdependence of all living things, including humans, rooted in a deep sense of God as Creator.”<sup>396</sup> The acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all creatures has been indeed proposed by many theologians as a cornerstone for ecological conversion. It is also highly emphasized by *Laudato Si'*, which again and again reminds that everything in the world is connected. Similarly, other theologians assert that humanity needs to retrieve first of all its earthiness or consciousness of belonging to the earth community. While Moltmann, for instance, states that human beings are *imago mundi*, and they can only exist in community with all other created beings and can only understand themselves in that community,<sup>397</sup> Edwards declares that human beings are made from stardust, and they have to be seen always as rooted within the community of life.<sup>398</sup> In this sense, ecological conversion requires that human beings nurture their belonging to a wider community, which goes far beyond humanity, and the acknowledgment of their dependence on and necessity of other creatures for their life and fulfillment.

Nevertheless, although the consciousness of being part of the community of creation with all other creatures, and of sharing with them the same creatureliness are crucial for an ecological conversion, they are not strong enough to ensure a real transformation in people's minds and lifestyles. Acknowledging dependency on other creatures and recognizing that humanity belongs to the larger earth community do not necessarily entail any ethical commitment or specific behavior. No clear moral obligation follows from the assertion of the interconnectedness of everything in the world. Relations can span a large array of types, and

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<sup>396</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Seeds of Hope: Facing the Challenge of Climate Justice* (London: CAFOD, 2009), 67.

<sup>397</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 186.

<sup>398</sup> Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 7–26.

they can even be oppressive. The awareness of the web of interconnection among all creatures certainly underlines both the breadth of the consequences of human action on the earth, and the necessity of other creatures that human beings need in order to survive and develop. Yet, ecotheology requires more than that to be able to shake up people's imagination and help them to discern pathways to true life. As Sally McFague puts it "we *are* part of the whole, and we need to internalize that insight as a first step toward living truthfully, rightly, on our planet. But we need more than a sense of oneness with the earth to live appropriately on it."<sup>399</sup>

This is why I believe that the interpretation of *imago Dei* as *kenosis* offers some insights that help ecotheology to reframe theological anthropology. Without a doubt human uniqueness needs to be thought of in terms of our rootedness and relatedness with other creatures, but the language of kinship and the earth community, in speaking of the bond between human beings and the rest of creation, falls short of shaping a theological framework suitable enough in order to revise and change theological anthropology. Accordingly, I believe, in tune with Celia Deane-Drummond, that even kinship is still insufficient for a theological interpretation of how humans connect with other animals, and that traditional language, such as the image of God, may be useful if suitably qualified.<sup>400</sup> *Kenosis* provides exactly the kind of understanding of the *imago Dei* that is needed today, which carries an ethical component which can illuminate the relation between humanity and other creatures, as well as foster among humans an ecological commitment toward the flourishing of all kinds of life. As a result, the dynamic and performative character of the image is adequately put forward and its

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<sup>399</sup> Sallie McFague, "Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 166.

<sup>400</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 278.

ontological, relational, and functional features are well combined. *Imago Dei* as *kenosis* enables ecotheology to rethink the place and role of humanity within creation, emphasizing the necessary human accountability that stems from its particular vocation on earth. Ecological conversion has to do therefore not only with awareness of our creatureliness and the membership to the earth community, but also with what makes us different and therefore morally accountable to God for the well-being of creation.

## **2. Personal Ecology: the Respect of Limits**

The call for ecological conversion resonates with Saint Paul's invitation to the Philippians to have in themselves what Jesus Christ's mind or attitude was (Phil 2:5). As mentioned the verb *φρονεῖν* can be understood to refer to a change of the opinion one has about oneself and others, which should be totally different from the one proposed by the mundane values of selfishness, conceit, and self-interest to which Paul alludes in the preceding verses. In this sense, the center of gravity of this verb is not just the materiality of Jesus Christ's action, but rather a way of being, a manner of considering oneself and others, according to the spirit of humility and self-emptying love which will be presented in the following verses. What therefore can *kenosis* offer to a fruitful and meaningful understanding of humanity in the context of the ecological crisis? What are the insights that can help in reframing theological anthropology and the interpretation of the *imago Dei*?

The first element that stems from *kenosis* to a timely depiction of humanity is the category of limit. Despite the fact that this category may be spontaneously and narrowly associated with restriction and prohibition, it is a promising source for renewing the theological understanding of humanity. For it is a polysemous notion that when connected with *kenosis*

reveals all its ecological strength in order to foster an ecologically friendly understanding of human beings.

The category of limit is frequently invoked as an important component in dealing with current ecological challenges not only within theology but also in the context of scientific, political, and economic reflection on ecology. Theologians draw upon this notion in order to emphasize the existence of boundaries which must be respected to avoid the development and increase of ecological disasters. Indeed, at the root of the current crisis lies the transgression and forgetfulness of certain limits which are crucial in maintaining creation's well-being. Pope Francis, for instance, asserts that "a fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power."<sup>401</sup> The notion of limit therefore is a timely anthropological category for renewing Christian understanding of humanity within the context of creation.

**a. *Kenotic anthropology: discerning and respecting limits***

Limits can span a large array of types depending on their origins and the features of the boundary that they establish. So, it is important to determine what kind of limit may be instrumental in revising theological anthropology through the lens of ecological sensibility, and to differentiate it from other boundaries which are present in human life and interaction within the earth community. Theological reflection on ecology indeed draws on different meanings and kinds of limits aiming to connect environmental challenges with Christian doctrine, and foster ecological commitment among believers. This variety of meanings is present, for instance, in the rhetoric of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. While it is true that all these

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<sup>401</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," no. 78.

references to the category of limit, when put together as a system, help in dealing with ecological challenges from a theological viewpoint, I believe that it is nonetheless important to point out not only their differences and particular emphases but also their anthropological implications. In doing so, I aim to highlight the kind of limit that the notion of *kenosis* propounds, which may be inspiring and fruitful for transforming the way we conceive of our place and role on earth, and for discerning and embodying more ecologically friendly lifestyles.

A first use of the notion of limit refers to physical or ecological boundaries. The complex web of interactions within ecosystems and the biological, chemical, and physical functioning of the earth entail certain limits of what is and what is not possible on it, if the well-being of species and natural processes is to be respected and not greatly disturbed. Some of these limits are impossible to overcome, and hence represent a permanent boundary which wakens humanity from the illusion of infinite and unlimited growth. This is the case, for instance, of the availability of nonrenewable natural resources such as fresh water, or the maximum amount of toxic particles that the air of a given place can hold without becoming extremely dangerous for or incompatible with life. These examples show the existence of natural or ecological limits which humanity needs to respect. Pope Francis asserts that the idea of infinite or unlimited growth is based precisely on the denial of these limits, and on the false notion that an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed.<sup>402</sup> Nevertheless, the recognition of the limits of our planet, not geographical but ecological, has been a relatively new consciousness. We have gone from believing in the unlimited capabilities

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., no. 106; see also no. 116.

of nature to the awareness of many breakpoints in our process of interaction with the biosphere. Today we realize with renewed force that the earth can no longer endure the pressure and the frantic pace of production which our way of life imposes. In itself, this awareness is not a purely negative experience. It is an occasion to question and transform our relationship with nature, with others, and with God, and therefore is the first essential step toward an ecological conversion, a *metanoia*. Accordingly, we need to foster what David Orr has called ecological literacy, namely, the knowledge not only about how nature works, its multiple inner connections, and therefore its limits, but also the practical attitude of using this knowledge in order to care for the world.<sup>403</sup> Increasing our ecological literacy certainly would have a positive impact on our sense of dependency on and belonging to the earth community, which are two important components for renewing theological anthropology.

A second use of the notion of limit refers to a moral imperative. It is a limit therefore which is set up through the recognition and acceptance of a given right or principle that must be followed and protected. This kind of limit is symbolically represented in Christianity by the divine prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge, as well as by the vegetable diet that God assigns to human beings in Genesis 1. Christian tradition has also consistently asserted the centrality of the common good as well as the universal destination of all goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, as a crucial principle of the whole ethical and social order.<sup>404</sup> Lately it is the justice and solidarity toward future generations that has begun to be identified as an important principle and criterion in dealing with ecological issues. *Laudato Si'* also refers

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<sup>403</sup> See David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (State University of New York Press, NY, 1992), and also Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 1–22.

<sup>404</sup> See Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," no. 93.

to ethical limits specially when speaking about scientific investigation and the technocratic paradigm which has permeated all ambitions of human life, and needs a moral framework that can orient and regulate their use. Pope Francis rightly argues that “a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power.”<sup>405</sup> He thinks that it is crucial to recognize and assert some universally valid principles if the laws which stem from them are not to be seen as mere arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.<sup>406</sup> The limit as a moral imperative requires that humanity be able to discern, formulate, and respect some universally valid ethical principles, which derive not only from the human vocation within creation, but also from the natural order of things. The ecological crisis is hence an opportunity to deepen the purpose and meaning of human action in the world, which is a key element for the renovation of theological anthropology.

Theological reflection on ecology also draws on the category of limit as ignorance or lack of knowledge. There is much that we just do not know about the interplay among species, the functioning of natural processes, the evolution and development of life, and the history and destiny of the universe. There is a real “cloud of unknowing” that both constantly reminds us of the limited access we have to the complex web of interactions within the world, and should elicit a humble recognition of this ignorance. Science is not only inherently unable to account for all the processes and systems in nature – asserting the opposite would be just an obstinate denial of scientific limits – but it is also incapable of offering all possible effective solutions in dealing with ecological challenges. *Laudato Si’* recalls that “it cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid., no. 136. See also no. 105 and 131.

<sup>406</sup> See Ibid., no. 123.

whole of reality. This would be to breach the limits imposed by its own methodology.<sup>407</sup> This is not to forget or downplay the tremendous progress and development that science and technology have brought to human life, for instance, in curing diseases or steadily improving life comfort and well-being. In this sense, science and its practical applications have overcome many limitations and changed the boundaries of what seemed impossible in the past. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that we have a limited knowledge about how the universe and nature work. There is much information that lies beyond our capacities and desires for deciphering the world. Reality is far more complex than what science attempts to explain, and its technical applications more limited than we often think. To deny such limitations is to remain in a promethean understanding of humanity, which goes hand to hand with a hubristic attempt to manipulate the world.<sup>408</sup>

The limit is also conceived of as a legal frontier. The call to humanity to respect certain limits can also be understood as an invitation to comply with the laws and regulations which aim to protect and preserve the well-being of nature. International agreements and a large diversity of local policies have been increasingly established in order to regulate the use of some specific goods and resources such as water, to restrict some actions which can be harmful or dangerous for life and the well-being of species such as pollution, and to prohibit other actions which are considered detrimental to the proper preservation of and care for ecosystems and creatures. Despite the fact that there is a general awareness that we need to

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., no. 199.

<sup>408</sup> See the remarkable work of French philosopher Pierre Hadot who distinguishes between two basic historical approaches that can be taken toward nature: Prometheus and Orpheus. The former represents the attitude toward nature that seeks to control and dominate it. Its historical deviation entails the attempt to unduly subdue and master nature, which is nowadays especially epitomized by the joint action of science and technique. Pierre Hadot, *Le voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de Nature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 129–205.

set up new regulations and legal frameworks for governing common goods such as the oceans, the air, and climate, negotiations among countries have been extremely hard and have shown little progress, or at least not the advancement that we need. We are certainly lacking not only universally valid laws and binding legal agreements, but also international institutions which may effectively supervise the compliance of these legal limits. *Laudato Si'*, for instance, asserts that we need, on the one hand, global regulatory norms to impose obligations and prevent unacceptable actions such as when powerful companies dump contaminated waste or offshore polluting industries in other countries,<sup>409</sup> and, on the other hand, an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called "global commons."<sup>410</sup> The fact that human action on the earth and its consequences has increasingly become cumulative and irreversible requires new legal agreements and globally valid laws which may secure the well-being of nature, and the preservation of and care for the life of species and ecosystems. Establishing the conditions for an ecologically friendly life necessarily supposes the formulation and respect of these legal frontiers.

Finally, the notion of limit is also used in theological reflection on ecology understood as human fallibility or human blindness both to recognize their true capacities and to accept themselves as limited creatures. No wonder therefore that human sin has been narratively expressed in terms of pride and reluctance to observe the limits which God establishes for them. At the same time, the fact that human reason, will, and action do not always concur is a sign of a limit which is inescapably part of our existence. In this sense, this last connotation of the notion of limit refers in theological terms to what is at the root of the current ecological

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<sup>409</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," no. 173.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., no. 174. See also no. 53.

crisis. Humanity both in its fallibility and its incapacity to respect boundaries is one of the main causes of the ecological challenges we face today. Pope Francis recalls that sin is manifested in the rupture of the three vital relationships with God, neighbor, and the earth itself, in which human life is grounded. The harmony between the Creator, humanity, and creation as a whole was indeed disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.<sup>411</sup> He also asserts that the limit understood as human fallibility or blindness is sometimes expressed in the misconception we hold about our role and place within creation,<sup>412</sup> and in the incapacity to acknowledge our own limitations and to grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us.<sup>413</sup> In this sense, ecological conversion is hence a turning of the head, so to speak, toward the blind spots of our way of depicting human action and purpose on earth. The existence of a limit understood as human fallibility and blindness implies that there will be no successful way of dealing with the ecological crisis without sincere repentance and an acute awareness of our limitations.

In order to take up the ecological challenges from a theological viewpoint, ecotheology therefore makes use of the category of limit through these five connotations, namely, ecological or physical impossibility, moral imperative, ignorance or lack of knowledge, legal boundary, and human fallibility and blindness. Nevertheless, I believe that *kenosis* propounds a different kind of limit, which can nurture our imagination and illuminate our discernment in searching for new ways of life. What is most characteristic of this limit is that it is not imposed from without, in the sense of exteriority or inevitability, but it is rather a limit that is freely

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., no. 66.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., no. 200.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 105.

discerned, established, and respected. Indeed, by taking the form of a slave, Jesus freely assumes the place of a person with no advantages, rights, or privileges, without claiming any special treatment. He deliberately poured out himself in self-giving love, humbling himself and being obedient to the extent of death on a cross. Recalling the conclusions of the previous chapter on *kenosis*, it can hence be said that the limit which this notion puts forward is tightly related to the refusal to use one's own capacities or condition just for one's own benefit or advantage. On the contrary, the act of self-limitation is for the sake of the flourishing and well-being of others, which is the purpose of divine self-giving love. The limit that stems from *kenosis* is also connected with the act of making room for other creatures, which means not only to respect their autonomy and integrity, allowing them to be and flourish, but also to establish life-giving relationships with them so that they may move toward their fulfillment. *Kenosis* therefore stimulates the discernment and respect of certain limits which, even though they entail self-limitation, are tightly related to the establishment of relationships with other people and creatures that point toward their flourishing and fulfillment.

There is no relationship without limits, for they are an essential instrument for establishing and shaping any relationship. All relationships, no matter their type, such as relations of friendship, labor, kinship, citizenship, love, and any other relationship implies certain limits, which are constitutive inasmuch as they enable and define these relations. This is the ultimate meaning and function of the limit that God establishes for humanity in Genesis about the tree of knowledge. This limit does not stem from a caprice or from a desire to keep what is seen as divine privilege, but it rather is the clear manifestation of God's will of

establishing a relationship with humanity.<sup>414</sup> What God intends through the prohibition of eating of the tree of knowledge is that humanity, by ratifying and respecting this limit, accepts to have a free and conscious relationship with God. In this sense, the limit propounded by *kenosis* is neither an external restriction nor a mere physical or moral boundary, but is rather a limit which arises from the discernment of what it means to be faithful to what we are and we are called to be as God's image-bearers.

In terms of personal ecology therefore *kenosis* raises the question of what kind of self-limitation we need to embrace in our lives if we want to be faithful to what Jesus reveals as the true image of God. The search for a new lifestyle supposes that we ask ourselves about the type of limits we need to discern, set up, and respect vis-à-vis not only our consumption of resources such as energy, water, food, and other goods, but also our pace of life, working and leisure time, the use of space and housing, the choice of means of transportation, the way we relate to our own bodies, and many other ambits of our personal life. This self-limitation stems from the faithfulness toward the flourishing and well-being of other people and other creatures. Our discernment has to address as well the issue of our capacities and position within both society and the earth community, aiming like Jesus to not use them solely for our own personal benefit or interest. We are therefore constantly confronted with the same archetypal choice as Adam and Jesus, knowing that it is the latter and not the former who has embodied the true image of God through his self-humbling path, and has allowed the Father to acknowledge, approve, and vindicate this distinctive way of understanding divine equality. Indeed, unlike Adam, who tries

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<sup>414</sup> For further development of the idea of limit as constitutive of any relationship, and the interpretation of Genesis in this perspective see Bernard Rordorf, "Dominez la terre," in *Liberté de parole : Esquisses théologiques* (Genève : Fribourg: Labor et Fides, 2005), 41–67.

to take advantage of his place within creation for his own gain, and tries to snatch equality with God, Jesus reveals the true image of God precisely because He freely refuses to use his equality with God for his own benefit, but on the contrary *εκενωσεν* and humbles himself, taking the form of a slave, and is obedient to the point of death on a cross. The notion of limit, therefore, needs not to be seen as something merely negative, but it can rather be the expression of faithfulness and authentic love. As a result, the most interesting insight is that *kenosis* offers a theological interpretation of the *imago Dei*, which not only triggers important questions and discernments, but also can also warrant and legitimate their implications. *Kenosis* activates, inspires, and illuminates from a theological viewpoint our quest for new ways of life in the context of the current ecological crisis.

South African theologian Ernst Conradie also assigns an important role to the notion of limit for the desirable renewal of theological anthropology. He does so by challenging what he considers to be an uncritical assumption or starting point in many theological depictions of humanity, in which human beings are conceived of as being at home on earth. This thesis that the earth is God's household, and humanity is at home on earth is theologically proposed in order to emphasize basically three main ideas, namely, 1) the interconnectedness of everything within creation, and hence that the well-being of humanity is inseparably linked with that of all life on earth, 2) the intrinsic belonging of human beings to the earth community, and 3) therefore that they must respect and protect other creatures, allowing the whole household of God to flourish. While Conradie acknowledges the strength of the household of God as a root metaphor for ecotheology, he believes that the human sense of belonging to the earth cannot be derived simply from the awareness that we are inextricably bound to the ecosystems in

which we live. He thinks that this sense of belonging should be understood as the very content of an eschatological longing, since “it is only through the Christian longing for the new earth that we can discover our *belonging*, in body and in soul, to this earth. *The earth may therefore be our one and only house but it is not our home yet.*”<sup>415</sup> It is at this point that Conradie draws on the category of limit as an important anthropological notion to define humanity. Human beings are not yet at home since they not only experience suffering, but are also constrained by the reality of their finitude. Accordingly, many believe that theological anthropology must emphasize human finitude, and that humanity must recognize and accept both human and planetary limitations. This would be to know and respect our place on earth, which is our home. Human beings need to learn to live within their limits. Conversely, Conradie asserts that the acceptance of human finitude should not be understood as an all-too-easy acquiescence to our human limits. He believes that “such an acceptance of limits and constraints carries the risk of a resignation to injustice,” and therefore “a willingness to test boundaries, to question whether limits are truly inevitable, may be required.”<sup>416</sup> As a result, the renewal of theological anthropology through the lens of ecological sensitivity requires more than a simple reminder, recognition, and acceptance of human limits.

Conradie thinks that the distinctiveness of humanity should not be defined merely in terms of the awareness and acceptance of its finitude, but rather the history of human beings – and of each individual person – may be described as a “journey of discovery” of the boundaries

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<sup>415</sup> Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 13. (italics in original)

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 138.

of our existence.<sup>417</sup> Human beings participate in the restless journey of the cosmos, and this entails for them that they not only progressively discover some limits, but also that they explore, challenge, and shift these limits. Human beings also conjecture about what lies beyond such limits, and ultimately recognize some of them as final, which allows for humanity “the rediscovery, reappropriation, reformation, and renewal of what lies within such boundaries.”<sup>418</sup> In sum, Conradie believes that the strategic move in order to revise theological anthropology is not merely to highlight human and planetary finitude, and that humanity must learn to live within these limits, since it is at home on earth, but rather to maintain that humanity is not at home on earth yet – which is God’s household – and that they are on the journey of testing, questioning, shifting, and sometimes accepting as final the limits which they encounter in their existence.

The category of limit is hence instrumental for reshaping theological anthropology. While I agree with Conradie that it is not sufficient enough for this purpose just to insist on the limitations of human existence and of the planet, I part company with him on his portrayal of human beings in relation to the limits that they encounter through their lives. Instead of bringing out the human experience and ability for discovering, challenging, and shifting limits, we rather need to emphasize our capacity for discerning, establishing, and respecting some limits. I certainly speak of limits which are not inevitable or imposed from without, but of limits that we set up freely and purposely aiming to be faithful to our identity of being God’s image-bearers. *Kenosis* therefore enables theology to enter into the conversation about the limits and changes of human lifestyle on earth which humanity needs to define and keep so as to honor

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

the fact that it is created in the image of God. Interpreting the *imago Dei* as *kenosis* provides a theological framework that not only insists on the human belonging to the earth community and on the interconnectedness of everything within creation, but also and primarily underscores that we are called to conceive of and live our humanity in terms of Jesus' *kenosis*, which implies the twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. Thus human beings as *imago Dei* must empty and limit themselves, not in the sense of losing or restricting their capacities, but rather and properly in the sense of fully embodying self-emptying love, which not only respects limits and makes room for otherness, but also engages in life-giving relationships that desire the other's well-being. Humanity must understand its power as power-in-love – *maîtrise maîtrisée* and *douceur*<sup>419</sup> which points to empowering others and enabling all creatures to move toward their fulfillment. Therefore, the twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving, inasmuch as it expresses and embodies true self-emptying love, is crucial for the renewal of theological understanding of the *imago Dei* and its consequences for humanity.

**b. Kenotic anthropology: broadening limits**

British Biblical scholars David Horrel, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate have also proposed *kenosis* as an important anthropological notion for the renewal of theological

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<sup>419</sup> See notes 47 and 139 of the previous chapter. In addition to the references already given in chapter two see André Wénin, "La Question de L'humain et L'unité Du Livre de La Genèse," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History*, ed. André Wénin (Leuven: University Press - Peeters, 2001), 3–34, and Paul Beauchamp, "Création et fondation de la loi en Gn 1,1-2,4a. Le don de la nourriture végétale en Gn 1,29s," in *La création dans l'Orient ancien: Congrès de l'ACFEB, Lille, 1985*, ed. Association Catholique Française pour l'étude de la Bible (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 139–82, who argues that God's invitation to humanity to control its power vis-a-vis other creatures points ultimately toward the establishment of a pacifist society.

anthropology and ethics.<sup>420</sup> They do so from a reading of Paul through an ecological lens. Drawing on the interpretation of the two Pauline texts most frequently cited in ecotheological discussions – Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20<sup>421</sup> – they argue that Paul provides an eschatologically oriented theological narrative, in which God's saving act in Christ of transforming and redeeming encompasses the whole of creation and not just humans. Furthermore, Paul's narrative suggests a special role for humanity within this divine act of cosmic reconciliation. The authors think that this is not to overstate the human care of creation, but rather to unveil the ecological implications of Paul's theology, in which “there is a key connection to be inferred between the liberated life of the children of God and the liberation of the nonhuman creation.”<sup>422</sup>

Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate show that the way in which Paul expresses this crucial role of humanity in God's reconciling act is through the notion of the believer's participation in Christ. This participation consists of a sharing in the pattern of Jesus' paradigmatic story of self-giving for others, which Paul summarizes tellingly in Phil 2:5-11.<sup>423</sup> Accordingly, the authors

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<sup>420</sup> David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>421</sup> For an ecological reading of Rm 8:19-23 and Col 1:15-20 see Brendan Byrne, “An Ecological Reading of Rom. 8. 19-22: Possibilities and Hesitations,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell et al. (London-New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 83–93; “Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8:18-22,” in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 193–203; Christopher Southgate, David G. Horrell, and Cherryl Hunt, “An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19-23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (October 2008): 546–79; Vicky Balabanski, “Critiquing Anthropocentric Cosmology: Retrieving a Stoic ‘Permeation Cosmology’ in Colossians 1:15-20,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 151–59; and “Hellenistic Cosmology and the Letter to the Colossians: Towards an Ecological Hermeneutic,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell et al. (London-New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 94–107.

<sup>422</sup> Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, 139.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 172. For another approach that asserts that Phil 2:5-11 encapsulates ‘Paul’s master story’ see Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

propose that it is possible to discern in Paul's theological narrative some ethical consequences which can shape and inform our response to current ecological challenges. They believe that *kenosis* can act as a unifying theological concept for this ethical implication and that "a paradigm of ethical *kenosis* might well stand at the heart of an ecological ethics that stands in faithful continuity with the Pauline tradition."<sup>424</sup>

According to the authors this ethical *kenosis*, that stems from Paul's highly Christological ethics, is defined by two main principles or meta-norms, namely, other-regard and corporate solidarity.<sup>425</sup> The principle of other-regard entails that it is a theologically warranted move to extend the community of moral concern to 'all things,' asserting that nonhuman creatures should be counted as 'others' worthy of moral concern. Furthermore, Christ's self-emptying also serves as an ethical paradigm, providing motivation and legitimization for humans to place the survival needs, or 'goods,' of other species at a higher priority than humanity's own nonessential resource requirements.<sup>426</sup> This does not mean that the good of another species, or of individuals within another species, should rank more highly, or even equally, with the good of humans, but it rather implies, on the one hand, that we need to broaden the limits of our moral concern in order to include other creatures – all things – and, on the other hand, that these "others" are worthy precisely of a costly, generous, and self-limiting regard from humans (...) such that the flourishing of creation is not only measured in terms of its ability to support

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<sup>424</sup> Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, 197. For the notion of ethical *kenosis* see also Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), chaps. 6–7.

<sup>425</sup> Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, chap. 8, and David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), chaps. 6–7.

<sup>426</sup> Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, 197.

human flourishing.”<sup>427</sup> Intimately related to the principle of other-regard, the meta-norm of ‘corporate solidarity’ involves the recognition that every creature has a part in the community of Christ’s redemptive purpose, as well as the recognition of our fellowship and interdependence with all creatures. Corporate solidarity thus points to the acknowledgement of “our dependence on other creatures, and how it binds us together with them, as receivers of their gifts, and, one hopes, as generous givers of our gifts to them.”<sup>428</sup> This sense of community and interdependence, as well as the certainty of our common path to salvation should elicit particular ethical concerns toward the vulnerable, the voiceless, the weak, namely, toward those who see their fulfillment and well-being threatened. As a result, not only future human generations, but also future generations of nonhuman species whose flourishing is under profound threat, and whose voice is barely heard, are the new poor, which are particularly of concern to God.<sup>429</sup> Thus, these two principles or meta-norms give form to ethical *kenosis*, and imply that we must broaden the limits of our moral concern in order to include other creatures, indeed all things, and to care for their flourishing and well-being.

Fleshing out the implications for humanity of this ethical *kenosis*, the authors assert that after the example of Christ there are at least three facets of *kenosis*. The first one is *kenosis* of aspiration which means that we are called not to make of status a “snatching-matter,” not to aspire to high status, but rather to look to the interests of others.<sup>430</sup> As Southgate puts it “the consequence of such grasping is at once to fail to respect fully the status of the other creature,

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>429</sup> See Ibid., 214.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 198.

and to fail to receive our situation as gift from God.”<sup>431</sup> In other words, *kenosis* of aspiration suggests that like Jesus we should not aim to use our own capacities or position in society only for our own benefit and at the expense of others, but that we should rather be able to relinquish for the sake of the well-being of the earth community even what may seem to be our acquired rights or what we think we deserve as human beings. Along with *kenosis* of aspiration, the authors state that we should put in practice a *kenosis* of appetite, which means that we have to be attentive to those disordered appetites that harm our freedom to contemplate appropriately, and relate lovingly to, the nonhuman creation in order to restrict and reorient them. This *kenosis* of appetite is necessary since disordered appetites drive us to consume more of the world’s fullness than is our share, and it should therefore be applied to our sometimes excessive expectancies of comfort and to our understanding of well-being, authentic basic needs, and lifestyle. Finally, the third facet of *kenosis* is what the authors called *kenosis* of acquisitiveness. It means that we need to revise not only our desires or ambitions, but also and especially the actual way we relate to the world’s goods and resources such as energy, food, water, land, and air. It means that we must order “our acquisition of the material trappings of life, which again are often acquired at the expense of the well-being of other creatures.”<sup>432</sup> These three facets of *kenosis* do not necessarily tell us which choices or decisions to make, and this is indeed a characteristic of this ethical *kenosis*; nonetheless they activate and

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<sup>431</sup> Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 101.

<sup>432</sup> Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, 199.

nurture in us the discernment and searching of new ways of life, as well as theologically legitimate their consequences and implications.<sup>433</sup>

In tune with what this ecological reading of Paul asserts, I believe that *kenosis*, as an interpretation of the *imago Dei*, not only entails the discernment, establishment, and respect of certain limits, which suppose a real attitude of self-limitation, but also and directly connected with the former, it implies an act of self-giving love, which pushes us to broaden the limits of our moral concern so as to include other creatures – the whole earth community – and consider them worthy of our selfless action and care. Therefore, despite the fact that the move from a broad anthropological model to the specifics of choices and actions is always a difficult and complex one, I believe that *kenosis* in its double meaning of self-limitation and self-giving love offers relevant and inspiring orientations for discerning and embodying ecologically friendly ways of life. It theologically opens up the possibility of thinking differently, which definitely plays a part in acting differently.

Sallie McFague in her most recent book also draws on the notion of *kenosis* as a new anthropological paradigm, which not only runs against the market-capitalist depiction of humanity, but it also has ethical implications that may help us to deal with the current

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<sup>433</sup> Both the choices and the consequences which stem from this discernment depend on one's geographical, cultural, social, and economic location. As a result, it is undeniable that there are differentiated responsibilities vis-a-vis the emergence and intensification of the current ecological challenges and their solutions. In this sense, reflecting on climate change and the “ecological debt” Pope Francis asserts that: “the developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development. The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs. We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*.” (italics in original) Francis, “Laudato Si’. On Care for Our Common Home,” no. 52.

ecological crisis.<sup>434</sup> In this sense, *kenosis* can be instrumental in order to imagine, interpret, feel, and moralize within an alternative paradigm. McFague thinks that, while the self-emptying pattern might have been seen in other times as a peculiarly religious way of being in the world, nowadays it might be the germ of a personal, professional, and public ethic for the twenty-first century.<sup>435</sup> *Kenosis* is an understanding of the self and power as facilitating and enhancing the well-being and flourishing of others, rather than domination and control of these others. *Kenosis* allows a theological narrative in which “words like restraint, sharing, limits, boundaries are central, and words like limitless, expansion, growth, development, which have ruled our personal, political, and market lives for centuries, move to the margins.”<sup>436</sup> *Kenosis* therefore is a crucial notion for the needed renewal of theological anthropology consistent with the current ecological crisis and the search for new more ecologically friendly ways of living.

McFague proposes a fourfold process so that people can move from belief to action in dealing with the ecological challenges. She draws on three historical characters namely, John Woolman, Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil, who help her both in illustrating this four-step process and in depicting the way in which true self-emptying love may be concretely embodied. The four steps are 1) experiences of voluntary poverty, 2) the focus of one’s attention on the needs of others, 3) the gradual development of a “universal self,” and 4) the new model of the universal self operates at both the personal and public levels. What is most interesting in McFague’s work for the sake of this project is that she also exhibits an understanding of *kenosis* as a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love.

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<sup>434</sup> Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

<sup>435</sup> See Ibid., 10.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 30.

The first step of the process she describes – the movement toward voluntary poverty – is a necessary preparation to a new view of the self, since it can be a powerful wake-up experience undercutting our sense of privilege and power in the context of a consumer culture in which we define ourselves by our possessions. She thinks that voluntary poverty epitomizes the kenotic or self-emptying path of Jesus, for the “goal of voluntary poverty was to create in its practitioners a sensibility, a way of being in the world, that had to do above all with the quality of being or relating that was humble and dispossessed, that was without pretense and that made no claim to rights and privileges for themselves.”<sup>437</sup> Voluntary poverty therefore points to self-limitation in the sense of renouncing of what may seem to be humanly acquired rights within the earth community, of limiting undue desires and expectations in the use of goods and resources, of giving up all material things which are not truly essential for our well-being, and of not using one's own position or capacities only for one's own benefit. As a result, the “secret of voluntary poverty is that it starts this process of redefining power as control (possessions, prestige, and even life itself) to understand power as love.”<sup>438</sup> There is no real kenotic self-emptying love without the choice and experience of a certain self-limitation. *Kenosis* requires that we discern, establish, and respect some limits.<sup>439</sup>

The other three steps identified by McFague – the focus of one's attention on the needs of others, which will end up developing a sort of “universal self” that will have an impact at both personal and public levels – point to the inclusion of other creatures into the sphere of human moral concern. As with the Pauline meta-norm of other-regard described above,

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>439</sup> For an economic, political, and social analysis of climate change and capitalism, which refers to the necessity of self-limitation, and the embodiment of new ways of life see Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

McFague thinks that the story of Woolman, Day, and Weil shows that it is a theologically warranted move to broaden the usual limits of human moral concern in order to include the rest of creation and to assert that nonhuman creatures should be counted as others worthy of moral concern.<sup>440</sup> The universal self develops “as the line constituting one’s concern (compassion or empathy) moves from its narrow focus on the ego (and the one’s nearest and dearest) to reach out further and further until there is no life left: even a caterpillar counts.”<sup>441</sup> It is enhanced in us inasmuch it increases in us the sense of the self as composed of, embodied in, and dependent on, other beings, both human and nonhuman.<sup>442</sup> Therefore, the movement from belief to action in dealing with ecological challenges demands that we go from a narrow, egotistic understanding of fulfillment of the subject – myself – to “an expanded inclusiveness of mutual flourishing that is only possible through the self-emptying of each subject in the dance of give-and-take that characterizes life at all stages – biological, human, cosmic, and divine.”<sup>443</sup>

Therefore, *kenosis* implies that we not only enter the path of self-limitation, but also are able to widen the limits of our moral concern beyond the so-called human family, so as to value and care for the whole earth community. In other words, *kenosis* requires that we are willing to practice self-emptying love for the good and well-being of all others. In fact, although *kenosis* is

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<sup>440</sup> For an insightful approach to Weil’s notion of “paying attention,” as a way of linking wisdom and wonder see the work of Celia Deane-Drummond: “Experiencing Wonder and Seeking Wisdom,” *Zygon*® 42, no. 3 (2007): 587–90; “Plumbing the Depths: A Recovery of Natural Law and Natural Wisdom in the Context of Debates about Evolutionary Purpose,” *Zygon*® 42, no. 4 (2007): 981–98; *The Ethics of Nature* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), chap. 9; “Wisdom, Justice and Environmental Decision-Making in a Biotechnological Age,” *Ecotheology* 8, no. 2 (2003): 173–92; and *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality, and Theology* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 1–18. Through the analysis of the notions of wonder and wisdom Deane-Drummond also argues that we need to expand the limits of our moral concern in order to include all creatures and care for their well-being. The practice and embodiment of wonder and wisdom will certainly have an impact on both personal and public level.

<sup>441</sup> McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xiii.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 181.

not a natural phenomenon the theme of dying to contribute to life beyond one's own is certainly present in the way nature works; however it is only at the human level that this is conscious; "only with us can the pattern that we and all others necessarily participate in also become one that we embrace."<sup>444</sup>

**c. Kenotic anthropology: asceticism and embodiment**

Along with highlighting the importance of discerning, establishing, and respecting some limits, and of widening the circle of our moral concern so as to include all members of the earth community, it is crucial to underscore that *kenosis* requires that these perspectives be practiced and translated into our daily lives. As mentioned, theology is concerned not only about orthodoxy, but it also aims for orthopraxis, so as to shape people's imagination and the way believers portray and make practical sense of the principal notions and images of Christianity. *Kenosis* as an interpretation of *imago Dei* thus intends to inspire not only a change in the way we conceive of our role and place within creation, but also and equally important a conversion in our attitudes, practices, and lifestyle. In this sense, I believe that asceticism is a notion which can both group and encompass different practices and actions that, being inspired by Jesus' self-giving path, are in tune with the searching and exploration of more ecologically friendly ways of life.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>445</sup> Along the same lines Sarah Coakley speaks of theology as an ascetical exercise asserting that "the task of theology is always, if implicitly, a *recommendation for life*. The vision it sets before one invites ongoing – sometimes disorienting – response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God. One may rightly call theology from this perspective an ascetical exercise – one that demands bodily practice and transformation, both individual and social (...) What distinguishes this position, then, from an array of other 'post-foundationalist' options that currently present themselves in theology, is the commitment to the discipline of *particular* graces bodily practices which, over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of knowing." Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18–19.

It is true that asceticism may be seen as a term laden with negative associations such as withdrawal from the world and repression, and that some may suspect that it encourages harmful practices for the body as well as an unfair appreciation of the latter. Nonetheless, it is also true that the voices calling for asceticism in our lives increasingly multiply. In this case, asceticism is broadly understood as different forms of self-restraint and austerity, as a necessary means to deal with the current ecological challenges. Sarah Coakley, for instance, distinguishes between a true asceticism and a false repression. She thinks that a revived, purged, and lived form of ascetical life is necessary, since it helps us discern and reorient all desires such as the desire to dominate, to subjugate, to consume, and own, as well as those good longings and instincts, such as the desire to love, for justice, empathy, and altruism and also a concern for the common good.<sup>446</sup> In his presentation of *Laudato Si'*, John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, has also emphasized that we urgently need an ecological asceticism, for "the spirit and the ethos of asceticism can and must be adopted if our planet is to survive."<sup>447</sup> Along the same lines I believe that the term asceticism can not only be detached from negative associations, but it can also meaningfully encompass and link a large array of practices, attitudes, and efforts of people, who are currently exploring new and alternative lifestyles.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 1–28.

<sup>447</sup> See <http://www.news.va/en/news/metropolitan-john-zizioulas-laudato-si-give-orthod> consulted on June, 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>448</sup> Some think, on the contrary, that although some practices we might understand as related to asceticism are useful and needed in the contemporary world, the word asceticism must be avoided – and a new term must be coined – if Christianity is not to perpetuate its popular caricature as body-denying and world-rejecting. See Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), chap. 5.

In doing so, asceticism should not be reduced to only its historical concretion in the life of the monks at the dawn of religious life. It should not therefore be reduced to and exclusively associated with their religious practices relating to social withdrawal, restriction of food, regulation of sexuality, sleep deprivation, and the formation of religious community. Rather, asceticism is a much more widespread experience and practice, both nowadays and throughout history.<sup>449</sup> Asceticism has been defined in different ways, and it is true that it is a hard task to advance a cross-cultural valid definition.<sup>450</sup> Nonetheless, I believe that the approach provided by Richard Valantasis is not only meaningful, but also useful in order to embrace all those current practices and attitudes oriented toward the searching for and embodiment of new ways of life in the context of the ecological crisis. He defines asceticism as “performances within a dominant social environmental intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Many scholars have shown that asceticism is wrongly thought to be part only of the past of religion and cultures, and that it was practiced exclusively in monastic life. Nonetheless, ascetic tendencies are still currently present and can be identified in different spheres such as the culture of dieting, vegetarian food practices, and the growing stringency in relation to bodily cleanliness, and its consequences for the management of sickness and old age. See, for instance, Julia Twigg, “Modern Asceticism and Contemporary Body Culture,” in *Beyond Pleasure: Cultures of Modern Asceticism*, ed. Evert Peeters, Leen Van Molle, and Kaat Wils (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 227–44; and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), who asserts that “in the tight sense asceticism is a product of early Christian ethics and spirituality; in the loose sense it refers to any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification,” xiii.

<sup>450</sup> For a good account of the complexity of asceticism depending on our cultural context, religious tradition, and historical background see Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Ascetic Impulse in Religious Life. A General Response,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 505–10. For a good account of the history of the origins of Christian asceticism, as well as for the classification of the latter in four different types see Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), chap. II and VI. For a good account of asceticism in recent theological thought see Nathan G. Jennings, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2010), 1–21.

<sup>451</sup> Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (1995): 797. This definition has been further elaborated and refined in other publications. See, for instance, Richard Valantasis, “A Theory of Asceticism, Revised,” in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008), 101–16.

There are three crucial aspects in this definition, namely, performances, intention, and symbolic universe. As to performances, asceticism revolves around practice and embodiment. In other words, it has to do with doing differently, and not merely with a new way of conceiving of reality. While the early Christian monks developed a particular set of behaviors historically considered as ascetic, such as fasting and sleep deprivation, today's call for ecological asceticism raises the question about the type, sphere, and scope of performances that may be explored and embodied, so as to render visible and real an ecologically friendly lifestyle.<sup>452</sup> These performances can be related to our use of water, food, energy, land, and means of transportation, as well as to the styles and manners which guide our social interactions. They can also be related to our patterns of consumption and production, as well as to our choices for work, recreation, and living place. Since they are concrete actions, they are both communicable and imitable. Accordingly, a wide array of actions and attitudes can be adopted as a manifestation of ecological asceticism which aims at an ecologically friendly lifestyle.

Secondly, it is precisely their intention that distinguishes these performances as ascetic. In this sense, no action, no matter its austerity or harshness, can be considered in itself as ascetic regardless of its purpose. Ascetic actions are not ends in themselves, but rather means toward a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe. This is why asceticism is always a deliberate and voluntary performance. Valantasis asserts that “asceticism (...) aims to resist dominant givens. Asceticism constructs itself as alternative, perhaps subversively so, to a perceived or real dominant context (...) Asceticism always defines

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<sup>452</sup> See, for instance, Kathleen Fischer, *Loving Creation: Christian Spirituality, Earth-Centered and Just* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), chap. 10.

itself as resistant or withdrawn from a perceived or real dominant context.”<sup>453</sup> Ecological asceticism therefore intends to challenge the values, beliefs, and practices, which underlie the ecological crisis, such as the throw-away culture, on the one hand, and to foster, establish, and inaugurate new ways of life which may not only fruitfully deal with the current ecological challenges, but also meaningfully express the human dependency on, and belonging to the earth community, as well as the human care for other creatures’ flourishing and well-being. Therefore, the intention of these ascetic practices is not merely negative, in the sense of opposing and resisting a dominant culture or *status quo*, but it is also positive inasmuch as these practices point to opening up new perspectives for personal lifestyle and social interactions. This is why discernment is a key element within ecological asceticism.

Finally, as the definition provided by Valantasis suggests, ascetic practices intend to create an alternative symbolic universe able to nurture, sustain, and legitimize them. The nascent new subjectivity and the alternative social arrangement, which stem from ascetic performances, certainly need legitimization. Accordingly, asceticism resists and defies a given dominant culture not only in the realm of practice, but also and equally important in the realm of ideas. Valantasis states that “the ascetical symbolic universe always operates in the presence of other universes, and, therefore, it is always consciously developed and maintained as an

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<sup>453</sup> Valantasis, “A Theory of Asceticism, Revised,” 102. Along the same lines, Margaret Miles states that “the immediate goals of asceticism (...) include self-understanding, overcoming of habituation and addiction, gathering and focusing of energy, ability to change our cultural conditioning, and intensification or expansion of consciousness.” See Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 162.

opposing force.”<sup>454</sup> A circular movement can be thus identified from practice to a new understanding of reality and vice-versa. They mutually justify and enhance each other.<sup>455</sup>

Drawing on this definition of asceticism, *kenosis* can be instrumental in dealing with the current ecological challenges, not only because it can inspire and elicit a particular set of practices, but also insofar as it offers them a theological legitimation. The interpretation of the *imago Dei* as *kenosis* can be a source of fruitful ascetic practices, which may resist and confront those values, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie the ecological crisis. The twofold movement of *kenosis* – self-limitation and self-giving love – operates at the three levels of the definition of asceticism. Understood through the lens of both Christology and the theology of creation, *kenosis* exhibits a particular set of actions, which are related to making room for others respecting their autonomy and integrity, to renounce the use of one’s own power and position in society exclusively for only one’s own benefit, to establish life-giving relationships, and to take the place of the one who serves and cares for the well-being and flourishing of all the members of the earth community. Jesus’ self-emptying and self-humbling path, as well as God’s *kenosis* in relation to creation, have the ability to prompt and guide ecological asceticism in its exploration and embodiment of a different way of doing things, namely, alternative ecologically friendly lifestyles. *Kenosis* also enables people to theologically justify and legitimate these actions on the basis of an understanding of humanity that takes its foundation in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Thus, it helps theology to shape a symbolic universe able to explain and sustain ecological asceticism.

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<sup>454</sup> Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” 812.

<sup>455</sup> For a similar approach, which emphasizes the connection between practice and discourse within ascetic performances, see Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–34.

Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I has been a prominent advocate of an ascetic ethos as a necessary human response to all problems originated by the present crisis.<sup>456</sup> Indeed, it can be said that the absence of a true ascetic life is at the root of the challenges we face nowadays. Asceticism is one way of life that comes from the Christian heritage and that proves itself not only relevant but also currently vital for counteracting those attitudes and practices which are detrimental for the flourishing of the earth community as a whole.

According to Bartholomew, asceticism is a suitable corrective for our culture of wasting, inasmuch as it counters selfishness and self-centeredness, and fosters our sense of gratitude and the rediscovery of beauty. Asceticism is accordingly a path toward freedom, a way of liberation; and “the ascetic is the one who is free, uncontrolled by attitudes that abuse the world, uncomelled by ways that use the world, characterized by self-control and by the ability to say ‘no’ or ‘enough.’ It [the ascetic way] is moving away from what we want as individuals to what the world needs as a whole. It is valuing everything for itself, and not simply for ourselves. It is regaining a sense of wonder and being filled with a sense of goodness.”<sup>457</sup> Asceticism is therefore always a voluntary and deliberate path, which stems from an honest reflection on and a radical reversal of our attitudes and practices. In this sense, asceticism is not a flight from society and the world, but rather as Bartholomew asserts, is “a communal attitude of mind and

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<sup>456</sup> See Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer, and On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision, and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). For the role of asceticism in facing the ecological crisis from the viewpoint of Orthodox Christian theology and spirituality, see John Chryssavgis, “The Earth as Sacrament: Insights from Orthodox Christian Theology and Spirituality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 92–114, and “A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Theology and an Ecological World View,” *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 214–22. For an Orthodox Christian theological perspective on ecology see John Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Pub Co, 1999), and John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>457</sup> Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 360.

a way of life that lead to the respectful use, not abuse, of material goods.”<sup>458</sup> It is more concerned with engagement with, and political and social action in, the world than with flight from it, so as to nurture a religious life. It implies that one moves from only one’s needs and desires, to what the earth community requires as a whole. An ascetic ethos hence brings about the widening of limits of our moral concern in order to include and care for the well-being and flourishing of all creatures.

Although Bartholomew does not directly associate *kenosis* with asceticism, he asserts that the latter is tightly related to Jesus’ cross and the call to all disciples to carry their crosses. He asserts that “the cross is the singular, ultimate, and absolute solution to the ecological crisis. The cross reminds us of the reality of human failure and of the need for a cosmic repentance. In order to alter our attitudes and lifestyles, what is required is nothing less than a radical reversal of our perspectives and practices.”<sup>459</sup> He proposes the cross as the guiding symbol for the needed transformation of minds and practices so as to effectively deal with the ecological crisis. Therefore, I believe that it is a warranted move to connect asceticism with *kenosis*. The latter raises the concept of asceticism, which is able to encompass all current attitudes and performances which aim to explore and inaugurate alternative modes of life that not only take into account our dependence on and belonging to the earth community, but also are concrete expressions of our caring for the whole of the earth.

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 296. He goes on to say that “the environmental crisis will not be solved simply by sentimental expressions of regret or aesthetic formulations of imagination. It is the “tree of the cross” that reveals to us the way out of our ecological impasse by proposing the solution of (in theological terminology, “salvation” through) self-denial, the denial of selfishness or self-centeredness. It is, therefore, the spirit of asceticism that leads to the spirit of gratitude and love, to the rediscovery of wonder and beauty.”

Ascetic ethos is for all humans, since self-limitation and self-giving is a way of loving; they are the expression of love for all humanity and for all creatures. It is not an invitation to look toward the past and just imitate what the monks at the dawn of religious life did. Rather, it is a call to translate into daily life what *kenosis* may inspire and elicit in us as a transformation of the way we conceive of our role and place within creation, and as a modification of our practices and attitudes toward all the members of the earth community, other humans included. I subscribe to what Kallistos Ware asserts about asceticism, which is “universal in its scope – not an elite enterprise but a vocation for all. It is not a curious aberration, distorting our personhood, but it reveals to us our own true nature (...) without asceticism none of us is authentically human.”<sup>460</sup> *Imago Dei* as *kenosis* expresses indeed what we are and what we are called to be as God’s image-bearers. In the context of the ecological crisis, an ascetic ethos is certainly part of what *kenosis* demands from us, so as to allow this image to be progressively imprinted in us by the Spirit.

### **B) Social Ecology: the Civilization of Poverty**

Renewing therefore theological anthropology within the context of the ecological crisis, along with making possible ecological conversion at the personal level requires that we are able to discern, establish, and respect certain limits, are capable of widening the circle of our moral concern in order to include all members of the earth community and care for them, and finally are willing to explore and embody an ascetic ethos translating into daily life the practices and ways of living which *kenosis* as an ecological image inspires and elicits in us. Nonetheless, as

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<sup>460</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

*Laudato Si'* recalls "the ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion."<sup>461</sup> Indeed there will be no real transformation of the way we inhabit the world if we do not revise our social interactions, and the values and attitudes which nurture and command the bond between us. The way in which social interaction is conceived of, organized, and embodied by individuals certainly pertains to any ecological analysis of human existence. It has been well demonstrated as well that the social interaction between human beings affects and influences the nature-humanity relationship. It is clear that the exploitative practices vis-à-vis nature, are just an extension or expression of a pattern of domination among humans, and that environmental problems and their consequences often touch the poorest among the poor. Hence, tackling environmental challenges implies addressing social issues as well. Likewise, dealing with social inequalities and injustices requires taking into account environmental problems. This is something that Catholic social teaching has consistently asserted and that the last papal encyclical emphasizes as it maintains that "a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*"<sup>462</sup> As the first chapter has shown it is a false dilemma thus to think that we need to choose between prioritizing environmental challenges or social inequality and injustices. Dealing with the former necessarily entails dealing with the latter.

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<sup>461</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," no. 219.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., no. 49. Although the encyclical makes no reference to him, it is almost impossible not to associate this approach with Leonardo Boff's book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

## **1. The search for notions and images**

The social dimension of ecology is rendered visible in different topics such as forced migration for environmental causes, city planning, world hunger and the production and distribution of food, production and access to drinking water, energy generation and use, the management of waste, models of production and consumption, and security and health in relation to dangerous diseases. Accordingly, these different examples raise the question about a suitable theological narrative able to inspire and nurture social transformation. In the same way that the reflection on the notion of limit and the ascetic ethos helps us translate into daily life the implications of *kenosis* for personal ecology, theology needs to find some overarching images or concepts capable not only of providing concrete content for social renewal, but also of depicting and imagining the way that an ecologically friendly social interaction looks. Put differently, while *kenosis* – the movement of self-limitation and self-giving love – may well be applied to personal ecology through both deliberately discerning, establishing, and keeping some limits, as well as exploring and embodying an ascetic ethos, theology has to provide some notions and images which are the translation of *kenosis* and its consequences into social life. In order to be useful and fruitful these notions and images have to be able to clearly show the path and goal of the needed social transformation toward a society with an ecologically friendly lifestyle, as well as to shape and trigger our imagination in order to picture alternative ecologically mindful ways of interacting among us and of our inhabiting the world.

There are certainly already some notions and images which have been proposed nowadays as responses to the ecological crisis. They aim to voice new modes of life, different to those which have been at the root of the challenges we face today, and to guide accordingly

the social transformation that we need if we want to seriously take into account, and successfully deal with the current crisis. One of these notions recently has been “another world is possible” which is the motto of the World Social Forum. The latter is an open space – as the forum defines itself – which gathers non-partisan and non-governmental organizations, and motivates a decentralized debate, reflection, proposals-building, experiences-exchange, and networking in order to put in place concrete actions toward a more solidary, democratic, and fair world, as an alternative to neoliberalism. Accordingly, the World Social Forum – which meets annually since 2001, usually in parallel to the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting – conceives of itself as a conscious exploration of and searching for new ways of social interaction and life, opposing the social and environmental harm which stems from the pursuit of a global neoliberalist system. This is why the Forum asserts that we especially have to establish alternative modes of production and consumption, since another world is not only possible but in the current circumstances is also rather something needed.

Another example of notions and images that intend at present to confront the global economic system and offer alternatives ways of living is the worldwide movement of fair trade. With a rich and diverse history depending on countries which span through decades, this social movement aims to help producers in developing countries achieve better trading conditions, and to promote sustainability. This last goal relates not only to care for the environment within the production and distribution process, but also to respect for human rights and the compliance with basic standards of working conditions, such as a fair wage. As a result, the movement seeks to promote greater equity in international trading markets, along with securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers in developing countries. The social

movement for fair trade encompasses a large array of associations and NGOs as well as including different organizations which certify the products that respect the principles of fair trade in their production and distribution processes. Despite the inevitable criticism that both the World Social Forum and the fair trade movement have raised, they serve to illustrate the current searching for notions and images that may inspire us in putting into practice alternative lifestyles, and may indicate the goal of social transformation.

Nonetheless, I believe that these two examples fall short in providing an overarching image strong enough to guide and shape the needed revision of our social interactions and ways of life. The motto “another world is possible” underscores both the urgency of finding alternative lifestyles and the hope that it is possible, but it does not offer a clear content and a picture of how this new world should look like, aside from the fact that it should be different from the one shaped by neoliberalist economy, whereas the fair trade movement is not able to sustain a global social transformation inasmuch as it is focused on and restricted to only one aspect (though a very important one), of our social interactions, namely, trading. As a result, neither of the two meets simultaneously the requirements of providing specific content for the goal and the path of social transformation, and of encompassing all nuances and aspects of human life within their thrust toward a new world.

## **2. The civilization of poverty: Ignacio Ellacuría’s legacy**

Accordingly, I believe that the notion of “the civilization of poverty” coined and proposed by Ignacio Ellacuría S.J. – philosopher and theologian of liberation –<sup>463</sup> can be a great

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<sup>463</sup> For a general introduction to Ellacuría’s life and work see Jon Sobrino, *Ignacio Ellacuría: El hombre, el pensador, el cristiano* (Bilbao: Ediciones Ega, 1994); José Sols Lucía, “El Legado de Ignacio Ellacuría Para Preparar El Decenio

and relevant source of inspiration nowadays. It not only provides concrete content for social transformation that is not a mere call for renewal, but also can function as an overarching image or horizon which helps us to recognize the interconnection between social and environmental challenges, and offers a special and well delineated goal to be attained if we are to effectively respond to the ecological crisis. “The civilization of poverty” is a notion that is found within Ellacuría’s mature writings, and which he developed and deepened over the last seven years of his life, before his assassination in 1989. Although he does not strongly associate this notion with the ecological crisis – which at that time was still in the process of getting global acknowledgement – I believe that the “civilization of poverty” is a sound and timely way of expressing the consequences and implications of *kenosis* for social ecology. In this sense, it captures well that which *kenosis* as an ecological image can contribute to the transformation of our social interactions and the establishment of a social ecologically friendly lifestyle. The civilization of poverty helps to build a theological narrative of self-limitation and self-giving love, and meaningfully translates into daily life the change of minds, attitudes, and practices which *kenosis* can advance and substantiate within social ecology.

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de Su Martírio,” *Cuadernos Cristianisme i Justícia* 86 (1998): 1–25; “Las Razones de Ellacuría,” *Cuadernos Cristianisme i Justícia* 191 (2014): 3–32; and Michael E. Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (New York: Crossroad, 2009). For a good systematic presentation of Ellacuría’s theology see Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2004); and José Sols Lucía, *La Teología Histórica de Ignacio Ellacuría* (Madrid: Trotta, 1999). For a good systematic presentation of Ellacuría’s philosophy see Héctor Samour, *Voluntad de Liberación. La Filosofía de Ignacio Ellacuría* (Granada, Spain: Comares, 2003); and for a brief introduction to it see Armando Savignano, “La Filosofía de La Liberación. El Testimonio de Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Logos. Anales Del Seminario de Metafísica* 47 (2014): 321–29. For recent good translation of part of Ellacuría’s work see Michael E. Lee, ed., *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013). For a good compilation of Ellacuría’s articles see Ignacio Ellacuría, *Escritos Filosóficos*, 3 vols. (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1996, 1999, 2001); *Escritos Teológicos*, 4 vols. (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 2000 and 2002); and Ignacio Ellacuría, *La lucha por la justicia: selección de textos de Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Juan Antonio Senent (Bilbao, Spain: Universidad de Deusto, 2012).

Ellacuría makes reference to the notion of civilization of poverty in four articles, which span from 1982 to 1989.<sup>464</sup> Although, he does not systematically define the civilization of poverty, he does provide sufficient elements and insights which allow us to understand what he conveys by this notion, and the main features of this civilization. Ellacuría was not only aware of the novelty of this concept, but he also thought that it was the necessary response to the evil consequences of, and the social inequality produced by capitalist civilization.<sup>465</sup> The civilization of poverty indeed has to be understood as dialectically opposed and in response to the civilization of wealth. Ellacuría aims to emphasize through the use of the notion of poverty the dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty, and not poverty in itself, for “in a world sinfully shaped by the dynamism of capital and wealth, it is necessary to stir up a different dynamism that will overcome it salvifically.”<sup>466</sup> Accordingly, the civilization of poverty cannot be rightly understood if it is disconnected from the civilization of wealth, which is actually its opposite. The former, therefore, as a horizon and goal, seeks not merely the improvement or tweaking of the latter, but rather its overcoming. For the civilization of wealth is now causing

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<sup>464</sup> See Ignacio Ellacuría, “El Reino de Dios Y El Paro En El Tercer Mundo,” *Concilium* 180 (1982): 588–96; “Misión Actual de La Compañía de Jesús,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 29 (1993): 115–26 (this article was written in 1983 and published posthumously in this journal); a speech which he delivered in 1988 at the inauguration of an international meeting: “La Construcción de Un Futuro Distinto Para La Humanidad,” accessed July 7, 2016, [http://www.mercaba.org/FICHAS/Teologia\\_latina/construcci%C3%B3n\\_futuro\\_distinto\\_humanidad.htm](http://www.mercaba.org/FICHAS/Teologia_latina/construcci%C3%B3n_futuro_distinto_humanidad.htm); and “Utopía Y Profetismo Desde América Latina. Un Ensayo Concreto de Soteriología Histórica,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 17 (1989): 141–84, which was republished as “Utopía Y Profetismo,” in *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos Fundamentales de Teología de La Liberación*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, vol. 1 (Madrid: Trotta, 1990), 393–442. For the English translation of this last text see “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuria*, ed. Mathew J. Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 7–55.

<sup>465</sup> Jon Sobrino thinks that the “civilization of poverty” is one of the notions which are unfortunately frequently forgotten in the analysis of Ellacuria’s thought. He states that this notion has to be retrieved and deepened, for it is timely and relevant for our time. See Jon Sobrino, “‘El Ellacuría Olvidado’. Lo Que No Se Puede Dilapidar,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 27, no. 79 (2010): 69–96.

<sup>466</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 41.

constantly greater and graver ills, so “what must be favored is not just its correction but its replacement by something better, by its contrary – that is, by a civilization of poverty.”<sup>467</sup>

It is worth citing at length Ellacuría’s appreciation of the civilization of wealth:

“the civilization of wealth and of capital is the one that, in the final analysis, proposes the private accumulation of the greatest possible capital on the part of individual, groups, multinationals, states, or groups of states, as the fundamental basis of development. Likewise, the possessive accumulation— whether by individuals or families – of the greatest possible degree of wealth, serves as the fundamental basis for their own security and for the possibility of ever growing consumption as the basis for their own happiness.”<sup>468</sup>

What ultimately drives the civilization of wealth is therefore the accumulation of riches. This is the leading principle which this civilization proposes for the unfolding of history that consequently becomes the goal and the horizon of individuals and families’ lives. Ellacuría thinks that the omnipresent and all-pervasive search for wealth has clearly become a principle of dehumanization with harmful and negative consequences for the relationship between countries and people, for the daily life of millions of individuals, and certainly also for the relationship between humanity and nature. This is not to deny that the capitalist system has brought benefits to humanity such as scientific and technical development that should be preserved and furthered, but rather to recognize that it has produced greater evils and that the self-correction processes that the civilization of wealth has are not sufficient to reverse its destructive course. The civilization of wealth, on the one hand, has proven itself as unable to

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 40.

meet people's basic needs, and on the other hand, it has increased the breach both between rich countries and people, and their poor counterparts.

The civilization of wealth therefore has to be judged by its real implications. Ellacuría offers two images for exposing these consequences. The first one is the image of an inverted mirror. He asserts that the poor countries and people are like an inverted mirror in which the first world sees its deepest truth, the one that it is trying to hide or disguise. The second one is the stool test. The living conditions within the poor countries and the existence of crucified people shows the true state of the health of the first world. This is what appears in the stool examination of the first world.<sup>469</sup> Although Ellacuría emphasizes mainly the exploitation among people and the poor living conditions created by the civilization of wealth, he does underline the harm and aggression which this civilization entails for nature. The latter should not be seen merely as raw material or a place to invest.

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<sup>469</sup> See Ellacuría, "La Construcción de Un Futuro Distinto Para La Humanidad." See also Jon Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty. Ignacio Ellacuría's 'Taking Hold of Reality,'" in *No Salvation Outside the Poor. Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008), 1–18. According to Ellacuría human intelligence has unavoidably an ethical and practical component, since it aims not only at capturing the meaning of reality, but also at assuming its demands in order to lead it toward its greatest possible realization. Drawing on the philosophy of Zubiri, he distinguishes three interconnected dimensions within the human intellection process of reality, namely, 1. Realizing the weight of reality (noetic dimension; *hacerse cargo de la realidad*), 2. Shouldering the weight of reality (ethical dimension; *cargar con la realidad*), 3. Taking charge of the weight of reality (practical dimension; *encargarse de la realidad*). The apprehension process of reality unveils the truth of the latter. Ellacuría states that not all locations offer the same epistemological access to reality. This is why, according to him, the real face and implications of the civilization of wealth can be perceived only from the third world and the crucified people, who unveil its deepest negativity. For Ellacuría's development of these categories see Ignacio Ellacuría, "Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico latinoamericano," *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 322–323 (1975): 409–25; "La Superación Del Reducccionismo Idealista En Zubiri," *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 477 (1988): 633–50; and "Fundamentación Biológica de La Ética," *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 369 (1979): 419–28. For an analysis of these three dimensions of human intelligence see Orfilio Ernesto Valiente, *Liberation Through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 80–86; Lorena Zuchel, "Ignacio Ellacuría, Filósofo Cristiano. Reflexión Filosófico-Teológica Sobre La Inexorable Acción de Cargar Con La Realidad," *Teología Y Vida* 55, no. 4 (2014): 631–51; and Samour, *Voluntad de Liberación. La Filosofía de Ignacio Ellacuría*, 91–94. For an analysis of the concept of the negativity of reality see Héctor Samour, "The Concept of Common Evil and the Critique of a Civilization of Capital," in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Mathew J. Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 205–13.

Along with the factual incapacity to meet people's basic needs and the increasing of the distance between rich and poor within societies and the world, the civilization of wealth entails a dehumanizing dynamic which, having wealth as the supreme value, suffocates humanities deepest capacities, creativity, and solidarity. Ellacuría thinks that this pull toward a profound dehumanization manifests itself, for instance, in

“abusive and/or superficial and alienating ways of seeking one’s own security and happiness by means of private accumulation, of consumption, and of entertainment; submission to the laws of the consumer market promoted by advertising – in effect, sheer propaganda – in every kind of activity, including the cultural; and a manifest lack of solidarity in the individual, the family, and the state with regard to other individuals, families, or states.”<sup>470</sup>

This historical dynamic of competitive individualism can thus be considered as a moral and humanistic failure.<sup>471</sup> This is why Ellacuría insisted on the idea that history needs to be turned back, subverted, and sent in a different direction.<sup>472</sup>

One of the key arguments which Ellacuría put forward to dismiss the civilization of wealth is that it is not universalizable. Drawing on the Kantian categorical imperative, which states that people should act in such a way that they could desire that the maxim of their action would become a universal law – and therefore the goodness of any given action is directly related to the possibility being universally performed – Ellacuría declares the immorality of the civilization of wealth. In fact, the lifestyle proposed by the latter cannot be materially

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<sup>470</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 20.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>472</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “El Desafío de Las Mayorías Pobres,” *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 493–494 (1989): 1078.

universalized, and even if this was possible, it would not be desirable. On the one hand, “there are not enough resources on earth today to let all countries achieve the same level of production and consumption as that of the countries called wealthy,” and, on the other hand, the civilization of wealth “implies a maximum degree of a lack of solidarity with the greater part of human beings and of peoples of the world, especially with those most in need.”<sup>473</sup> Ellacuría goes on to the point of calling this civilization anti-Christian, and contrary to the Christian utopia and hope, namely, the kingdom of God.<sup>474</sup> Accordingly, he believes that the reservations in the New Testament regarding wealth, power, and worldly honors, “along with its emphatic proclamation of poverty, service, and the humiliation of the cross, can and should be translated into the realm of the visible and the social,”<sup>475</sup> not only at the personal level, but also as a model for society. The civilization of wealth must be therefore replaced and overcome by the civilization of poverty, which is in tune with Jesus’ message, and more in accord with the exigencies and dynamisms of the Reign of God.

The Christian utopia, in fact, advocates for and animates a historical realization of a new humanity and a new earth, which includes a social, political, economic, and cultural transformation of reality.<sup>476</sup> It is in this context that Ellacuría introduces the notion of the “civilization of poverty,” which is certainly more akin to the Christian utopia than the civilization of wealth. The new order has to be based on the fundamental New Testament principle “that all might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).<sup>477</sup> This is not to say that what the

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<sup>473</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 22.

<sup>474</sup> See Ellacuría, “Misión Actual de La Compañía de Jesús,” 118 and 124.

<sup>475</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 47.

<sup>476</sup> For an analysis of Ellacuría’s notion of utopia see Mikel Aramburu Zudaire, “El Pensamiento Utópico de Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Razón Y Fe: Revista Hispanoamericana de Cultura* 272, no. 1405 (2015): 397–408.

<sup>477</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 29 and 52.

fullness of life consists in is clear, or that the path toward it is unambiguously delineated, nonetheless what is clear is that the civilization of wealth is not going historically in that direction.

It is worth citing at length Ellacuría's definition of the civilization of poverty,<sup>478</sup> which "founded on a materialist humanism transformed by Christian light and inspiration, rejects the accumulation of capital as the engine of history and the possession and enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization. It makes the universal satisfaction of basic needs the principle of development and the growth of shared solidarity the foundation of humanization."<sup>479</sup>

Three elements can be identified in this definition. First of all, as mentioned, Ellacuría counterpoises the civilization of poverty to the civilization of wealth in both its searching for richness as what ultimately drives history, and the possession and enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization. The civilization of poverty does not aim for universal pauperization, but rather it looks for the establishment of a different global project for humanity, a different set of values to configure the world, in which the basic values of the Gospel and of the Kingdom of God are realized. Thus, it has to do with the overcoming of the current state of things and not merely with the improvement of what does not work within the civilization of wealth. The idea that the civilization of poverty should be founded on a materialist humanism transformed

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<sup>478</sup> Jon Sobrino, "Civilización de La Pobreza Contra Civilización de La Riqueza Para Revertir Un Mundo Gravemente Enfermo," *Papeles de Relaciones Ecosociales Y Cambio Global* 125 (2014): 139–50; Mauricio Víquez Lizano, "Ignacio Ellacuría: Un Pensamiento Y Una Opción," *Espiga* 23 (2012): 169–99; and Ricardo Ribera, "'Civilización de La Pobreza': La Radicalidad Del Último Ellacuría," 2000, [http://www.uca.edu.sv/facultad/chn/c1170/civilizaciondelapobreza\\_uca.html](http://www.uca.edu.sv/facultad/chn/c1170/civilizaciondelapobreza_uca.html), which is an expanded versión of "Reflexiones a Partir Del Planteamiento Ellacuriano de Una Civilización de La Pobreza," in *Para Una Filosofía Liberadora*, ed. AA.VV (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1995), 163–80.

<sup>479</sup> Ellacuría, "Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology," 40.

by Christian light and inspiration, points to unveiling the harmful consequences of the economic materialism already verifiable in history, and to proposing as the dynamizing principle of history “the dignifying of work, of work that will have as its principal object not the production of capital but the perfecting of the human being.”<sup>480</sup> In fact, Ellacuría associates the civilization of poverty, in a more sociological perspective and in light with John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, with the establishment of a civilization of work.<sup>481</sup>

This drives us to the second element of Ellacuría’s definition of the civilization of poverty, which unlike the civilization of wealth does not aim at the greatest accumulation of richness as the engine of history, but rather at the universal satisfaction of basic needs. Although aware that which may be considered as basic need may vary among different cultures, Ellacuria believes that it suffices to look at the conditions of extreme poverty or destitution to concur with the identification of these basic needs as “proper nourishment, minimal housing, basic healthcare, primary education, sufficient employment, and so forth.”<sup>482</sup> Having the universal satisfaction of basic needs as its principle of development, the civilization of poverty aims for a state of affairs which guarantees “the freedom of personal choices, and an environment of personal and community creativity that permits the emergence of new forms of life and culture, new relationships with nature, with others, with oneself, and with God.”<sup>483</sup> In other words, the civilization of poverty sets the permanent and secure satisfaction of basic needs of all humanity as an essential goal of history and a *sine qua non* for any sort of development, however, once this is achieved, it makes the free development, of the individual

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>481</sup> See, for instance, Ellacuría, “El Desafío de Las Mayorías Pobres.”

<sup>482</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 41.

<sup>483</sup> Ellacuría, “El Reino de Dios Y El Paro En El Tercer Mundo,” 595, translated in Sobrino, “The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty. Ignacio Ellacuria’s ‘Taking Hold of Reality,’” 14.

and of peoples the main driving force of history. Accordingly, it does not tend toward the uniformization of cultures and societies – as the civilization of wealth does through the global imposition of the laws of the economic marketplace to all human spheres – but it rather aspire both to liberate human creativity, and to respect and develop the entire wealth of peoples.

The third element of Ellacuría's definition of the civilization of poverty is that this civilization proposes as its humanizing principle not the possession and enjoyment of wealth, but rather the growth of shared solidarity.<sup>484</sup> While the civilization of wealth has put in place a dynamic of closed and competitive individualism, which is certainly detrimental not only for humans but for the entire world, the civilization of poverty fosters and sustains a "civilization of austerity, of sharing, of communication of goods and lives, of human creativity, as the blossoming of an inward grace."<sup>485</sup> In this sense, the civilization of poverty stimulates the cultivation of essential virtues such as selflessness, self-giving, and the sharing of one's own things. The civilization of wealth has to be overcome, therefore, not only because it entails exploitation among people, and destruction vis-a-vis nature, but also and especially because it nurtures a dehumanizing dynamic, which is at the antipodes of the values of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

It should be clear by now that the use of the word "civilization" is meant to convey a general state of things, a general order for living, with a specific dynamism which not only configures and unites the different aspects of daily life, but also guides its development.

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<sup>484</sup> It is worth noting that Pedro Casaldáliga and Jon Sobrino, following on Ellacuría's notion of the civilization of poverty have spoken of a "civilization of solidary poverty" and of a "civilization of shared austerity." See, for instance, Sobrino, "Civilización de La Pobreza Contra Civilización de La Riqueza Para Revertir Un Mundo Gravemente Enfermo," 143, n. 10.

<sup>485</sup> Ellacuría, "Misión Actual de La Compañía de Jesús," 120, translated in Martin Maier, "The Civilization of Poverty and Today's Global Challenges," in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Mathew J. Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 230.

Therefore, it does not refer only to the economic dimension of our social interaction. As civilization, thus, it encompasses all spheres of people's life, namely, economic, social, political, and cultural. At the beginning, Ellacuría thought to use the word culture instead of civilization but, being told that 'culture of poverty' had a pejorative connotation within anthropological sciences, he ultimately chose the concept of civilization.<sup>486</sup> As to the notion of poverty, in light of the distinctions made by the Latin-American bishops at Medellín, Ellacuría understood it in various senses:<sup>487</sup> 1) as real poverty, defined as the lack of those goods required to satisfy the most basic needs of human beings; 2) as spiritual openness to God and one of the evangelical counsels of perfection; and 3) as solidarity with the poor and commitment to their struggle for justice. While real poverty is a product of the civilization of wealth, and it has to be addressed and overcome, the other two meanings have a positive sense, and they are closely intertwined within Ellacuría's concept of the civilization of poverty. The latter has indeed become a historical necessity for overcoming the harm caused by the civilization of wealth, and promoting higher forms of humanity. Poverty can be assumed actively and willingly as a use and distribution of the goods of the earth that it makes it possible for everyone to have access to material and cultural means to have a truly human life. This poverty, according to Ellacuría, "is what really gives space to the spirit, which will no longer be drowned by the desire to have

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<sup>486</sup> See, for instance, Sobrino, "Civilización de La Pobreza Contra Civilización de La Riqueza Para Revertir Un Mundo Gravemente Enfermo," 143.

<sup>487</sup> See CELAM, "Pobreza de La Iglesia," in *Documento Final. Segunda Conferencia General Del Episcopado de América Latina* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1968). For an analysis of the notion of poverty within liberation theology see Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Meaning and Scope of Medellín," in *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 59–101; "Pobres Y Opción Fundamental," in *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos Fundamentales de La Teología de La Liberación*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Madrid: Trotta, 1990), 303–21; and "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19–38.

more than other, by the lustful longing to have all sorts of superfluities, when most of humanity lacks what is most necessary.”<sup>488</sup>

As to the sources of the idea of the civilization of poverty, it is worth noting that Ellacuría draws, in addition to the historical Jesus presented by the Gospels, on the meditation of the two standards of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.<sup>489</sup> In this meditation Saint Ignatius introduces two roads to which all people are confronted in their life. The first one is the path that leads to damnation and to the opposite of fullness of life. It has three steps, starting from coveting of riches, then, to attaining the empty honors of the world, and finally to overweening pride, which leads to all other vices.<sup>490</sup> The second path, the one that guides to fulfillment and salvation, is also marked by three steps, namely, poverty, the desire for reproaches or contempt, and finally humility. These three steps lead to all other virtues. Saint Ignatius, therefore, dialectically counterpoises three pairs: poverty as opposed to riches; insults or contempt as opposed to the honor of this world; humility as opposed to pride.<sup>491</sup> Ellacuría extends and applies to the social order what Saint Ignatius proposes for individuals. While the path that starts with actual poverty leads to integral humanization, the one that begins with coveting riches ends with the opposite total dehumanization. In the same way, Ellacuría dialectically counterpoises the civilization of wealth and the civilization of poverty. The latter

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<sup>488</sup> Ellacuría, “Misión Actual de La Compañía de Jesús,” 120. (my translation)

<sup>489</sup> See, for instance, Ignacio Ellacuría, “Lectura Latinoamericana de Los Ejercicios Espirituales de San Ignacio,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 23 (1991): 111–47; Juan Hernández Pico, “Ellacuría, ignaciano,” in *Ignacio Ellacuría, aquella libertad esclarecida*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Rolando Alvarado (Santander, Spain: Editorial Sal Terrae, 1999), 245–74; and J. Mathew Ashley, “Contemplation in the Action of Justice: Ignacio Ellacuría and Ignatian Spirituality,” in *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuria*, ed. Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2006), 144–68.

<sup>490</sup> See, *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, n. 142

<sup>491</sup> See, *Ibid.* n. 146.

entails a humanizing dynamic, which heals and liberates people from the harm caused by the civilization of wealth.

Ellacuría emphasizes that it is vital that we undertake the overcoming of the civilization of wealth. On the one hand, we need “to create economic, political, and cultural models that can enable a civilization of labor to replace a civilization of capital.”<sup>492</sup> On the other hand, it is crucial to allow a fundamental characteristic of the civilization of poverty to grow positively stronger, in contrast to the closed and competitive individualism of the society of wealth.<sup>493</sup> We are therefore called to participate in this overcoming of the civilization of wealth, and of its detrimental consequences, in order to move toward a civilization of poverty; a general state of things, a global way of living and interaction which is in tune with Christian utopia.

Although Ellacuría does not strongly associate the concept of the civilization of poverty with the ecological crisis, it is clear that they are related. Theologian Martin Maier, for instance, has explicitly connected the notion of “civilization of poverty” to the environmental challenges we face nowadays. He thinks that Ellacuría anticipates the idea of global common goods, which has become very important in contemporary debates over development.<sup>494</sup> In fact, Ellacuría asserts that “the great benefits of nature – the air, the seas and beaches, the mountains, and forests, the rivers and lakes, in general all the natural resources for production, use and enjoyment – need not be privately appropriated by any individual person, group, or nation, and in fact they are the grand medium of communication and common living.”<sup>495</sup> On this point, Ellacuría is totally in tune with Catholic social teaching and its principles of the universal

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<sup>492</sup> Ellacuría, “El Desafío de Las Mayorías Pobres,” 1078, translated in Sobrino, “The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty. Ignacio Ellacuría’s ‘Taking Hold of Reality,’” 15.

<sup>493</sup> See Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 42.

<sup>494</sup> Maier, “The Civilization of Poverty and Today’s Global Challenges,” 236.

<sup>495</sup> Ellacuría, “Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America. A Concrete Essay in Historical Soteriology,” 43.

destination of common goods and the social responsibility of private property, which have to serve the poor first and foremost.<sup>496</sup> Moreover, inasmuch as the civilization of poverty makes the universal satisfaction of basic needs the principle of development, it can be identified as one of the resources to satisfactorily deal with the ecological crisis, especially in the context of the recognition of the natural environment as a collective good, and patrimony of all humanity and responsibility of everyone.<sup>497</sup> As a result, I believe that it is a theologically warranted move to connect the concept of the “civilization of poverty” and its implications with the social dimension of ecology, which in turn makes evident the tightly relation between environmental and social challenges.

### **3. *Kenosis* and the civilization of poverty**

From the previous analysis, I think that it is manifest that the concept of the “civilization of poverty” translates into the social level what *kenosis* may inspire and suggest for our social interaction. It is not that this concept exhausts everything that *kenosis* implies for our social transformation, but it is undeniably meaningful in this respect. On the one hand, it aims at a new configuration of social life able to eradicate any kind of exclusion and discrimination, which positively means to foster and promote those dynamics that nurture the wellbeing and fulfillment of all. The civilization of poverty in fact sets the growth of shared solidarity as the foundation of humanization. On the other hand, as mentioned, the notion of poverty does not point to universal pauperization, but rather it aims at the establishment of a different set of values to configure the world, in which the damaging consequences of the civilization of wealth

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<sup>496</sup> This is something that has been recalled again by Pope Francis in his last encyclical. See Francis, “*Laudato Si’*. On Care for Our Common Home,” nos. 93–5.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., no. 95.

can be resisted and counteracted. In this sense, I believe that the civilization of poverty is consistent with Jesus' *kenosis*; not for nothing Phil 2:5-11 is commonly associated with 2 Cor 8:9 which says that our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. Poverty is not an end in itself, but it rather pursues the enrichment of others. This is what Jesus intends by taking the role and place of a slave – *μορφη δουλου* – freely assuming the place of a person with no advantages, rights or privileges, without claiming any special treatment. Jesus' *kenosis* and voluntary poverty is not a depersonalizing process, but is rather the path toward full and abundant life for all. Along the same lines, the civilization of poverty is instrumental for building a theological narrative of self-limitation and self-giving love, which can guide the needed transformation of minds, attitudes, and practice toward an ecologically friendly social interaction.

Consequently, the civilization of poverty is a meaningful horizon which helps us to recognize the tight connection between social and environmental injustice, and provides a clear goal to be attained if we are to deal effectively with the ecological crisis, namely, the universal satisfaction of basic needs. The manifestations of the ecological crisis presented in the first chapter – water, waste, migration, and food – accentuate the pertinent and relevant character of the civilization of poverty inasmuch as it focuses on securing that all human beings can see their basic needs met.<sup>498</sup> It is in light of Jesus' *kenosis* that the civilization of poverty acquires its

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<sup>498</sup> The social implications of the civilization of poverty make a good counterpoint to the concept of sustainable development and its 17 goals, which have been defined within the UN. The notion of the “civilization of poverty” allows for clarifying the inherent ambiguity of the notion of sustainable development – such it has been defined since the Brundtland report – and provides a clear focus for action. For a good critique of the concept of sustainable development see, Eduardo Gudynas, “Desarrollo Y Sustentabilidad Ambiental: Diversidad de Posturas, Tensiones Persistentes,” in *La Tierra No Es Muda: Diálogos Entre El Desarrollo Sostenible Y El Postdesarrollo*, ed. Alberto Matarán Ruiz and Fernando López Castellano (Granada, Spain: Universidad de Granada, 2011), 69–96; *Eología, Economía, Y Ética Del Desarrollo Sostenible*, 5th ed. (Montevideo: CLAES, 2003); and “Ambiente,

deepest meaning and becomes a suitable concept for expressing the consequences of this downward mobility within the social realm. What Ellacuría proposes through this notion strongly resonates with what Philippians 2 asserts about Jesus.

If ecological conversion has to happen also at the social level, theology needs not only inspiring ways of conceiving of our social interaction, but also images or concepts that may function as beacons so as to shed light upon our discernment, and portray what an ecological friendly social interaction would look like. If we look at the theme of human work, for instance, we note that the civilization of poverty, inasmuch as it advocates for an economy based on real work and not on mere financial speculation, is totally in tune with what *Laudato Si'* asserts about the current necessity of protecting employment. Pope Francis reminds us that any approach to integral ecology has to take account of the value of labor. According to him work should not be led merely by the search for wealth, but it should rather be the setting for rich personal growth, "where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God."<sup>499</sup> The civilization of poverty, therefore, proves itself as a suitable overarching image for driving the needed social transformation. It certainly helps theology to voice what *kenosis* – as an ecological image – means for our social interaction and life.

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Sustentabilidad Y Desarrollo: Una Revisión de Los Encuentros Y Desencuentros," in *Contornos Educativos de La Sustentabilidad*, ed. Elba Castro Rosales and Francisco Javier Reyes Ruiz (Guadalajara, México: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de Guadalajara, 2011), 109–44.

<sup>499</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home," no. 127. As to the encyclical's reflection on human work see nos. 124-9.

### C) Environmental Ecology: Cosmic Humility

Having shown how *kenosis* is an inspiring, timely, and meaningful ecological image for personal and social ecology, I turn now to environmental ecology. As mentioned, this ecological dimension is by far the one that has been largely deepened and studied, to the extent that some erroneously consider the terms of ecology and environment as synonymous. The theological challenge again is to identify and draw upon images and notions which can guide not only an ecologically friendly representation of the relationship between humanity and other creatures, but also a way of living oriented toward the wellbeing, flourishing, and fulfillment of the entire earth community. In this last part, I aim to revise the notions of steward and stewardship which have become a sort of default position for many theologians when interpreting the *imago Dei*, and speaking of the role and place of human beings vis-à-vis other creatures. Despite the fact that this notion has been instrumental for connecting theological reflection with the ecological challenges, it has drawbacks as well, especially for what it does not say or it seems to imply. Accordingly, I believe that *kenosis* works as a suitable corrective for and a complement to the notion of stewardship. The former enables theology both to highlight the best of the latter, and to clear up its inherent ambiguity and put into words what it does not say. In this sense, after tracing the emergence of this notion within recent theological reflection, its importance for linking Christian faith to environmental challenges, and its advantages and downsides, I will concentrate on showing how *kenosis* corrects the notion of stewardship, heightens what is good in it, and provides other insights which serve as a significant complement for it in portraying the relationship between humanity and other creatures. I will finish this part by spelling out, through the lens of *kenosis*, the role and place of

human beings within the earth community. The main goal is to prove the fruitfulness of *kenosis* as an anthropological and ecological image.

### **1. *Imago Dei* as stewardship**

In the last decades, theology has been increasingly performing the double task which the ecological crisis requires of it. On the one hand, it has been raising critiques that stem from Christian faith toward the values, practices, and lifestyle that underlie the current challenges. On the other hand, it has been undertaking the needed ecological reform of Christianity which the crisis shows as inevitable. Hence, one of the important tasks has been the search for new and inspiring root metaphors able to portray both the God-creation relationship (divine agency) and the link between human beings and the rest of creation – their role and place – on the one hand, and to stimulate ecologically friendly thoughts and deeds, on the other hand. Many are the images and notions that have been proposed and explored in this respect, such as caretakers, guardians, priests of creation, earthkeepers, co-creators, and stewards. All these images certainly disclose a particular understanding of divine agency, the purpose of creation, the relationships between humanity and its Creator, and between humanity and the rest of the earth community.

The notion of stewardship has attracted greater consensus – more than other images and concepts – when depicting the role and place of human beings which God has assigned to them vis-à-vis other creatures. It has been indeed widely used within Christianity, and the Catholic magisterium and theology constantly refer to it to express the human vocation and divine call that human beings must exercise within creation. They are called to be responsible stewards of creation who are accountable before God for their stewardship.

### *a. The notion of steward within the Catholic magisterium*

The notion of stewardship is being frequently used in Catholic theology. The document of the International Theological Commission about the interpretation of the *imago Dei*, for instance, takes it as one of its overarching images, the other being communion.<sup>500</sup> The commission asserts that responsible stewardship is one of the great strands out of which the fabric of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is woven. Human beings exercise their role of stewards of the created world by way of participation in the divine rule, and therefore they are always subject to it and accountable before God. The document enumerates three ways through which humanity performs this entrusted stewardship, namely, “by gaining scientific understanding of the universe, by caring responsibly for the natural world (including animals and the environment), and by guarding their own biological integrity.”<sup>501</sup> Drawing on the interpretation of the *imago Dei* in *Gaudium et Spes* no. 34, the document states that the concept of humanity’s rule or sovereignty plays an important role in Christian theology. God has appointed human beings as God’s stewards in the manner of the master in the Gospel parables. Accordingly, the document asserts that humanity, which is “the only creature willed expressly by God for his own sake occupies a unique place at the summit of visible creation (Gen. 1:26; 2:20; Ps 8:6-7, Wisdom 9:2-3).”<sup>502</sup>

In the same way, the Catechism draws on the notion of stewardship both for explaining the meaning of the *imago Dei* and for representing the relationship between humanity and other creatures. It says that it is God’s plan that human beings have the vocation of subduing

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<sup>500</sup> International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God.”

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., no. 61.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., no. 58.

the earth as stewards of God. In fact, “God calls man and woman, made in the image of the Creator ‘who loves everything that exists’, to share in his providence toward other creatures; hence their responsibility for the world God has entrusted to them.”<sup>503</sup> Speaking of the universal destination and private ownership of goods, the Catechism states that the earth and its resources have been entrusted to the stewardship of humanity, which aims at the common good and the universal satisfaction of basic needs.<sup>504</sup> Animals as well are under the governance of human beings. They may be used for food and clothing, and to serve the just satisfaction of human needs. However, humanity must show them kindness.<sup>505</sup> When it comes to define human vocation and task within creation, the Catechism therefore advances the notion of stewardship.

The magisterium of the last three popes has brought the image of the steward to the fore in order to characterize the role and place of humanity within the earth community. John Paul II – who led and supervised the writing of the Catechism – also makes use of this notion for describing the calling that God makes to humanity vis-à-vis other creatures. In a general audience, entitled “God made man the steward of creation,” he asserts that human beings are stewards of God’s kingdom, who are called to continue the Creator’s work, a work of life and peace.<sup>506</sup> Humanity must exercise this task with wisdom and love, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness. Recalling the necessity of ecological conversion, John Paul II states that the current crisis can be explained by the fact that human beings are no longer Creator’s stewards, but have become autonomous despots. They have failed to fulfill their role of stewards

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<sup>503</sup> “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” no. 373, accessed October 5, 2016,  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/ccc\\_toc.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm).

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., no. 2402. See also 2404.

<sup>505</sup> See, Ibid., no. 2417 and 2457.

<sup>506</sup> See John Paul II, “General Audience, 17 January 2001,” no. 3.

inasmuch as they have not aimed at making the existence of creatures more dignified, at protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations, and at preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator's plan.<sup>507</sup> In a joint declaration with Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, John Paul II comes again to this idea and expresses that at the root of the social and environmental crisis lies human betrayal of the mandate God has given us: "to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom."<sup>508</sup> In this sense, the crisis reminds us that human beings have not been entrusted with unlimited power over creation, but rather they are only stewards of the common heritage.<sup>509</sup> Although the message that John Paul II issued in 1990 for the celebration of the world day of peace – "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation" – does not contain the notions of steward or stewardship, but it does display the same concept or understanding of the role and place of humanity within the earth community. It says that human beings – who have been made in the image of God – have to exercise their dominion over the earth with wisdom and love. God entrusted the whole of creation to humanity.<sup>510</sup> In different times and contexts, therefore, John Paul II has drawn on the notions of steward and stewardship for interpreting the *imago Dei* and depicting the relationship between human beings and other creatures.

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<sup>507</sup> See Ibid., no. 4.

<sup>508</sup> John Paul II and Bartholomew I, "Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I on Environmental Ethics."

<sup>509</sup> In fact, according to John Paul II, "progress in the field of ecology, and growing awareness of the need to protect and conserve certain non-renewable natural resources, are in keeping with the demands of true stewardship." John Paul II, "To the Members of the Agency of the United Nations in Nairobi," August 1985, no. 2, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850818\\_centro-nazioni-unite.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850818_centro-nazioni-unite.html).

<sup>510</sup> See John Paul II, "World Day of Peace 1990. Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," January 1, 1990, no. 3, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).

Benedict XVI has also used the image of the steward for characterizing the calling that God has made to humanity. In his encyclical "*Caritas in Veritate*," he reminds us that human beings are responsible for the whole of creation, and they legitimately exercise a "responsible stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population." Human stewardship, in this sense, aims at the protection of the entire earth community, and the right satisfaction of human basic needs.<sup>511</sup> Benedict XVI returns to the same ideas in his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace in 2008 – "The Human Family, a Community of Peace" – which asserts that human stewardship over creation must mirror the creative love of God, and that in order to be effective it needs dialogue and cooperation from all nations.<sup>512</sup> Two years later, in the context of the same celebration, Benedict XVI issued a new message – "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation" – which affirms that humanity has the duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it. According to this message, to be stewards of God is what it means to be created in the image of God and called to have dominion over creation. Unfortunately, many people in different countries and areas of our planet are experiencing increased hardship precisely because of the negligence of many others to exercise responsible stewardship over creation.<sup>513</sup> The message emphasizes that this role of a steward and administrator with

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<sup>511</sup> Benedict XVI, "Caritas in Veritate," June 2009, no. 50, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).

<sup>512</sup> See Benedict XVI, "World Day of Peace 2008. The Human Family, a Community of Peace.," 2008, nos. 7–8, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace.html).

<sup>513</sup> See Benedict XVI, "World Day of Peace 2010, If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation," 2010, nos. 6–7, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html#\\_ednref15](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html#_ednref15).

responsibility over creation, is a role which human beings must certainly not abuse, but also one which they may not abdicate.<sup>514</sup> Therefore, Pope Benedict stays within the same semantic field as Pope John Paul II – especially with the image of the steward – when it comes to explain what it means to be God's image-bearers and the implications of that for the relationship between humanity and other creatures.

Pope Francis in turn has also employed the notions of steward and stewardship in order to portray the task of human beings within creation. In his first apostolic exhortation – “*Evangelii Gaudium*” – he states that human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures.<sup>515</sup> It is worth noting that the word “steward” is usually translated into Spanish as “*administrador*.” However, in the Spanish version of this exhortation the word used is “*custodio*” which can be literally translated into English as “custodian.” The two words certainly have different meanings and overtones. The French version draws on the notion of “*gardien de la création*,” which is closer to custodian than to steward.

Francis returns again to the image of a steward both in the letter he issued in 2015 for the establishment of September 1<sup>st</sup> as the world day of prayer for the care of creation, joining the custom of the Orthodox Church, and in the message delivered on the celebration of this day one year later.<sup>516</sup> In these two texts again the concepts used in English, Spanish, and French are

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<sup>514</sup> See *Ibid.*, no. 13.

<sup>515</sup> See Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*,” 2013, no. 215, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

<sup>516</sup> See Francis, “*Letter of the Holy Father for the Establishment of the ‘World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation,’*” 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150806\\_lettera-giornata-cura-creato.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150806_lettera-giornata-cura-creato.html), and “*Message of the Holy Father for the Celebration of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation,*” 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160901\\_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html).

not the same, namely, “steward,” “*custodio*,” and “*gardien*” respectively, which have different meanings and connotations. Francis believes that this day of prayer for the care of creation will be a fitting opportunity for communities and believers to “reaffirm their personal vocation to be stewards of creation, to thank God for the wonderful handiwork which he has entrusted to our care, and to implore his help for the protection of creation as well as his pardon for the sins committed against the world in which we live.”<sup>517</sup>

In his last encyclical – *Laudato Si'* – Pope Francis gets fully into the theological reflection on ecology. Although the text focuses primarily on an ethics of care and insists on our duty of protecting our common home, it does propose the notion of steward when it comes to describe the role and place of humanity within the earth community. Criticizing excessive modern anthropocentrism, which deifies the technocratic paradigm and fails to find the true place of humanity in this world, Pope Francis asserts that “our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.”<sup>518</sup> It is worth noting that this time the three versions - English, Spanish, and French - concur with using the same concept – responsible steward, *administrador responsable*, and *administrateur responsable* – for describing the human task vis-a-vis other creatures. Further on, the text returns to the notion of stewardship in the context of asserting the importance of contemplation and sacraments to discover the presence and action of God in all things. It states that “the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.”<sup>519</sup> Therefore, although *Laudato Si'* highlights the ethics of care as the

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<sup>517</sup> Francis, “Letter of the Holy Father for the Establishment of the ‘World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation.’”

<sup>518</sup> Francis, “*Laudato Si'*. On Care for Our Common Home,” no. 116.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid., no. 236.

way through which humanity should accomplish its role vis-à-vis other creatures, and identifies the acts of caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving as an important part of this ethics, it does maintain the notion of steward as the overarching image which is able to express what it means to be God's image-bearer and to be entrusted with the whole of creation.

The Catholic magisterium therefore has been using preferentially and consistently in the last decades the notions of steward and stewardship in order to define and represent the place in which God has put human beings within the earth community, and the task they have been assigned in relation to other creatures.

**b. *The origins and foundation of this notion***

The inevitable question is, therefore, where does the notion of steward come from? And, how has it entered theological reflection, especially for expressing the calling humanity has received from God vis-a-vis creation?

As mentioned in the first chapter, Willis Jenkins identifies the strategy of Christian stewardship as one of the strategies of Christian environmental ethics, through which Christian theology has been connecting environmental issues to Christian doctrine and moral experience. He asserts that “stewardship emerged as a discrete theological discourse in the 1980s, supporting a public Christian environmentalism especially associated with evangelical Protestantism.”<sup>520</sup> Before that, over the 1970s, some theologians began developing the biblical trope of stewardship in theological response to the environmental crisis, and John Passmore published in 1974 *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, where he presents two traditional views that deny humanity to have unlimited dominion over

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<sup>520</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 78.

nature. While the first one sees human beings as stewards, actively responsible as God's representatives for the care of the world, the second one sees man as cooperating with nature in an attempt to perfect it.<sup>521</sup> The metaphor of the steward, therefore, starts to be used within theological reflection for voicing the task of humanity in relation to other creatures in the 1970s within American Protestantism, and more systematically in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, some show that the use of the notions of steward and stewardship for characterizing the role of human beings within the earth community can be traced back as early as Calvin, and more properly to the seventeenth-century English chief justice Matthew Hale who is the first who extended these concepts to human responsibility for the natural environment, as he asserts in his book of 1677 – *The Primitive Origination of Mankind, Considered and Examined according to the Light of Nature* – that “in relation therefore to this inferior world of brutes and vegetables, the end of man’s creation was, that he should be the viceroy of the great God of Heaven and Earth in this inferior world; his steward, villicus, bailiff, or farmer of this goodly farm of the lower world” whose charge is “to preserve the face of the Earth in beauty, usefulness, and fruitfulness.”<sup>522</sup> Richard Bauckham also ascribes the first use of the image of a steward to Hale, who used it for portraying the proper human relationship to the rest of creation. Bauckham thinks that in that context, stewardship was an alternative to the excessively anthropocentric Baconian view, inasmuch “it recognized ethical obligations arising from nature’s intrinsic value as created by God for God’s glory, not merely for human

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<sup>521</sup> John Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974). For another good account of the history of the use of the notion of a steward within Christian theology see Robin Attfield, “The Tradition of Stewardship,” in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, 2nd ed. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 34–50.

<sup>522</sup> Quoted in J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 877.

benefit.”<sup>523</sup> Humans must administer creation justly and without cruelty. However, despite this early use of the metaphor of a steward for expressing the role and place of humanity given by God, it will not be used again more systematically in theology until the 1970s.

Before that decade, the metaphor of the steward was first used in the 1950s and 1960s in relation to church campaigns for more resources, primarily money but also time and talents. In that context, therefore, the use of this notion meaning the wise use of money, time, and talents came to be widely accepted. Clare Palmer thinks that from this usage, the idea of human beings as stewards was applied to their relationship with other creatures. Accordingly, “it was probably this availability of the metaphor that first led to its wide application to the natural world. It could easily be extended from money, talents, and human resources, to refer to (so called) natural resources.”<sup>524</sup> Humanity is called to wisely administer God’s creation. Human beings are accountable before God, who remains as the actual owner of everything. The ecological crisis was hence the occasion to broaden the use of the notions of steward and stewardship, in order to embrace the human relationship not only to money, material resources, and time, but also to the entire earth community.

Canadian theologian John Douglas Hall has been one of the main advocates of the notion of steward as accurate and suitable for interpreting what it means for human beings to be God’s image-bearers in relation to the rest of creation. He has certainly also been one of the first to theologically found this notion more systematically.<sup>525</sup> Hall asserts that Hebrew ontology

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<sup>523</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Stewardship and Relationship,” in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (Leicester England: IVP Academic, 2000), 101.

<sup>524</sup> Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London--New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 66.

<sup>525</sup> See Hall, *Imaging God.; The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); and “Stewardship as Key to a Theology of Nature,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and*

has been historically overshadowed within Christianity by Greek ontology. While the latter, in its vision of the self, is hierarchical, substantialistic, static, spiritualistic, and dualistic, the former conceives of the self as being-in-relation. Accordingly, a substantialistic and spiritualistic interpretation of the *imago Dei* – which usually identifies reason and will as what distinguishes human beings from other creatures – has fostered in humanity a sense of superiority and has legitimated dominion vis-à-vis other creatures. This interpretation of the *imago Dei* is based on a one-sided affirmation of the distinction and unicity of humanity within creation. Instead, according to Hall, a relational understanding of being enables theology to maintain the tension between identification and distinction when speaking of human beings in their relationship to the rest of the earth community.

As a result, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Hall proposes a relational interpretation of the *imago Dei* where humanity “images (used as verb) its Creator because and insofar as it is ‘turned toward’ God. To be *imago Dei* does not mean to have something but to be and do something: to image God.”<sup>526</sup> Thus, the *imago Dei* must not be understood in terms of a constitutive human supremacy over other creatures, but rather as a particular vocation, task and responsibility. Hall believes that the image of a steward encompasses and holds together all the main components of the ontology of communion, namely, the dialectic between identification and distinction between human and other creatures, a sound interpretation of the *imago Dei*, the recognition of the creaturely character of human beings,

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*Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 129–44. For a good presentation of Douglas Hall’s theology and his use of the notion of stewardship see Louis Vaillancourt, *L’Intendance de la création. La vocation écologique de l’humain dans la théologie de Douglas J. Hall* (Montréal, QC: Médiaspaul, 2002).; and “Le Concept de Stewardship Chez Douglas J. Hall Comme Fondement D’une Théologie Écologique Christocentrée,” *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 29, no. 1 (2000): 35–53.

<sup>526</sup> Hall, *Imaging God*, 98.

and the portrayal of humanity as God's representative and counterpart within creation. In other words, the notion of steward gives expression both to our ultimate identity and to our responsibility vis-à-vis the earth community. It stands between an extreme anthropocentrism, which overlooks human dependence upon and shared traits with other creatures, and a biocentrism, which in turn fails to acknowledge the particular role, place, and responsibility of humanity within creation.<sup>527</sup> The notions of steward and stewardship therefore point primarily not to an action, but rather to a way of being before God, and before other creatures.

According to Hall, the notion of steward evolves within Scriptures from a literal sense – the literal description of an office or functioning – to a metaphorical meaning in which “the ‘other’ whose affairs the steward is to manage is God.”<sup>528</sup> He thinks that this metaphorical understanding is a highly evocative and appropriate medium to communicate the Gospel nowadays. This is why, the symbolic role of the steward is considered by many as “the Gospel in miniature.”<sup>529</sup> Accordingly, Hall asserts that the metaphor of the steward has theological, Christological, ecclesiological, and certainly anthropological implications. While Jesus can be seen as the steward of God’s varied grace, the Church can be conceived of as the disciple

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<sup>527</sup> The idea of stewardship as a middle way between anthropocentrism and biocentrism is developed also by Christopher Southgate, who asserts that stewardship may cover a wide variety of approaches, and distinguishes between two extremes of how stewardship can be understood, namely, a “weak stewardship” which would be of a merely conserving kind, and which would incline towards the biocentric end of the spectrum, and “strong stewardship,” stewardship as nurture which would involve change as well as conservation of non-human environments, and would incline towards co-creation, and therefore towards a more anthropocentric view of humanity within creation. See Christopher Southgate, “Stewardship and Its Competitors: A Spectrum of Relationships between Humans and the Non-Human Creation,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 185–95.

<sup>528</sup> Hall, *The Steward*, 42. Hall explains the origin of the English word “steward,” which began to appear in manuscripts in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This word was then available to translators of Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into the English language, including the very influential King James Version. The word was used to translate different Hebrew and Greek words, which were used to convey the office of the steward (26 occurrences within the OT and NT). In the NT, “steward” is used especially to translate the Greek word οἰκονόμος. See Ibid., 31–41.

<sup>529</sup> Hall, *The Steward*, 51.

community which is being incorporated into the work of Jesus – the great steward. As to the anthropological consequences of the metaphor of the steward, Hall asserts that it is not that we achieve the stewardly status through our works or imitation of Christ, but rather “we are graciously brought into a stewarding of God’s grace that has already been enacted by God’s chief steward.”<sup>530</sup> We are thus progressively incorporated through the Spirit into Jesus’ stewardship. As a result, not only the gratuitous and ontological character of the *imago Dei* within humanity is highlighted, but also its performative and dynamic dimensions.

Hall shows that the metaphor of the steward belongs to the most ancient Judeo-Christian heritage. It is offered to us by Scriptures and the early Church, and it provides a useful intellectual tool in order to grasp the whole thrust and meaning of the Christian message, and to discern what it means to be Christian in this world. This is why Hall asserts that in the context of the ecological crisis “stewardship is no longer just a nice ideal. It has become a social and political necessity.”<sup>531</sup>

## **2. Stewards of creation: ecological and theological criticism**

Despite the fact that steward and stewardship have become widely used notions for interpreting the *imago Dei* and voicing the place and role of humanity within creation, they have also been extensively criticized, especially for what they do not clarify and seem to imply in their portrayal of human beings in relation to other creatures. Many theologians have pointed out that the metaphor of the steward has become a sort of default position when theologically speaking of the task of humanity within the earth community, although it has clear

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>531</sup> Hall, “Stewardship as Key to a Theology of Nature,” 143.

drawbacks. It seems that it has been uncritically assumed as the best way of expressing what it means to be God's image-bearers in the midst of creation.<sup>532</sup> This is not to deny that it has been instrumental in connecting theological reflection to ecological challenges. It has provided indeed an alternative model to the one that stresses human domination and exploitation over nature, inasmuch as it strongly asserts that human beings are accountable to God – the true owner – for the way they administer creation. Nevertheless, it also has limitations that need to be taken into account, so as to complement and balance steward and stewardship with other theological images and notions.

The criticism against the metaphor of the steward revolves around three mains points. Firstly, it is seen as a non-biblical image, which also assumes a managerial language foreign to the Scriptures. Although it is true that the office of the steward exists and is exercised by some figures – like Joseph – throughout the Old Testament, and that the New Testament incorporates this notion in some parables and Pauline letters, these references speak neither of humanity as God's steward nor of humanity as being entrusted with the administration of creation.<sup>533</sup> The original use of stewardship within theology – and its usage beyond the theological realm – is tightly associated with money and resources, and this connotation of instrumental management entails that the spontaneous understanding of it, is that the rest of the natural world is there for us to be used. Although stewardship puts a limit on a limitless

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<sup>532</sup> For a good presentation of different theological stances around the notion of steward see R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>533</sup> Others think, on the contrary, that stewardship is the image that best captures the message of Scriptures. See Robin Attfield, "Environmental Sensitivity and Critiques of Stewardship," in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 76–91; and Bruce Reichenbach and Elving Anderson, "Tensions in a Stewardship Paradigm," in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 112–25. Some of the texts that are invoked in order to substantiate this approach are 1 Cor. 4.1, "stewards of the mysteries of God," and 1 Peter 4.10, "like good stewards of the manifold gifts of grace."

exploitation inasmuch as it conveys that humanity is accountable to God, it remains, as Clare Palmer denounces, that nature appears to be merely our resource for human benefit and use.<sup>534</sup> Moreover, it opens the door to a deistic interpretation of the God-Creation relationship, in which God is viewed as the original Creator who has then handed creation over to humanity, which is in charge of its administration. It seems that God, therefore, has stopped God's work of creation and human beings have taken the baton. In this viewpoint, far from meaning caring and protection, stewardship can be easily understood just as the human task of creating their own world.

Secondly, the metaphor of the steward does not seem to be strong enough to lead the renovation of theological anthropology in its representation of the role and task of humanity in the earth community. For many, it remains within an anthropocentric perspective which separates human beings from other creatures, and puts them in the highest rank of a hierarchical portrayal of beings. In this sense, non-human nature remains unavoidably subordinate and other in its relationship to humanity. As Anne Clifford recalls, the notion of stewardship does not "sufficiently attends to the fact that we human *are* the ecological crisis; it is we who are the major cause for the imbalances in the ecosphere."<sup>535</sup> In fact, the notion of stewardship easily prompts us to the "metaphor of scientific control and technological management which so dominates environmental management procedures, and with such ecologically deleterious consequences."<sup>536</sup> This is why others propose that theology must retrieve other biblical paradigms, which do not conceive of human beings as above or outside,

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<sup>534</sup> See Palmer, "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics," 72.

<sup>535</sup> Anne M. Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Science: Implications for an Ecological Theology of Creation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Theology* 8, no. 2 (1992): 84.

<sup>536</sup> Michael S. Northcott, "Ecology and Christian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 224.

but rather within nature. While the notion of companionship has been brought up by the brothers Himes, inasmuch as this notion enables theology to elaborate an environmental ethic grounded on a relational anthropology,<sup>537</sup> Paul Santmire, along the same lines, advocates for a biblical theology of partnership with nature, which is certainly more faithful than the theology of stewardship to the richness and complexities of the biblical witness.<sup>538</sup> Richard Bauckham also thinks that stewardship must be supplemented with the Christian awareness “of mutuality, interdependence, friendliness and confraternity between human beings and other creatures of God.”<sup>539</sup> The metaphor of the steward conveys thus anthropocentric overtones that overlook some biblical data, and are unhelpful for revising the theological understanding of the role and place of humanity within creation, in the midst of the current ecological crisis.

Finally, stewardship is criticized for its lack of specific content, and its pretension that humanity actually has the necessary knowledge and capacity to administer nature. On the one hand, the calling to administer creation does not provide clear-cut goals and does not necessarily point to the wellbeing and fulfillment of the whole creation. To do so, given that it

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<sup>537</sup> Kenneth R. Himes and Michael J. Himes, “Creation and an Environmental Ethic,” in *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 104–24. See also Kenneth R. Himes and Michael J. Himes, “The Sacrament of Creation Toward an Environmental Theology,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 270–83.

<sup>538</sup> See H. Paul Santmire, “Partnership with Nature according to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 32, no. 4 (2003): 381–412; “Rediscovering the Story Biblically: Beyond Anthropocentric Interpretations,” in *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 29–44; and “Partnership with Nature according to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 253–72. Santmire asserts that the biblical theology of partnership encompasses – and can be defined through – three fundamental expressions or emphases: 1. creative intervention in nature; 2. sensitive care for nature; and, 3. awestruck contemplation of nature.

<sup>539</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Modern Domination of Nature - Historical Origins and Biblical Critique,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 45. In an interesting article, Larry Rasmussen evaluates the images of the steward, partner, and priest of creation. See Larry L. Rasmussen, “Symbols to Live By,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 174–84.

does not exhibit an inherent criterion to orient the appropriate administration, stewardship requires other images or notions, which offer guidelines, and establish criteria for discernment of what it means to be God's steward vis-à-vis other creatures.<sup>540</sup> However, on the other hand, the idea that God has entrusted humanity with the administration of creation entails two problematic assumptions, namely, that nature necessarily needs humanity for its wellbeing and flourishing, and that humanity actually possess the knowledge and ability to control and oversee all natural processes. Then, it may well be just another expression of human hubris.<sup>541</sup> In this sense, the notion of stewardship leans toward what human beings must do and perform as God's stewards, but it neither voices human ignorance about nature, nor fosters humility and respect before the complexity and richness of the rest of creation. The metaphor of the steward displays a partial viewpoint as we "should not consider the special human role within creation only in terms of intervention and change, but also in terms of restraint and letting be."<sup>542</sup> In this sense, Richard Bauckham advocates for what he calls cosmic humility – a biblical theme – in the portraying of humanity before God and within the wider community of the earth.<sup>543</sup> In the two polarities, the one between intervening and letting be, and the one between knowledge to control and humility to accept ignorance, the notion of stewardship tips the balance in favor of human mastery over nature.

In sum, although it has become a sort of default position for many theologians, and also for the magisterium of the Catholic Church, the notion of stewardship is neither evident nor

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<sup>540</sup> Rae Murray points out that while not rejecting it, we cannot make do with a merely secular meaning of the term stewardship. See Rae Murray, "To Render Praise: Humanity in God's World," in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 291–311.

<sup>541</sup> See Bauckham, "Stewardship in Question."

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>543</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

unproblematic when trying to theologically represent the place and role of humanity within the earth community. It has certainly been instrumental in raising Christian awareness of the ecological crisis, and in incorporating accountability to God in the human interaction with other creatures. Nevertheless, it does need to be complemented with other notions and images, since it is “one limited part of the picture and not the whole.”<sup>544</sup> Accordingly, I personally believe that *kenosis*, as a sound, meaningful, and timely interpretation of the *imago Dei* theological motif, is a suitable corrective and complement for the theology of stewardship.

### **3. Revising stewardship: *kenosis* as an ecological image**

I do not think that the notions of steward and stewardship should be abandoned when trying to theologically express what it means to be God’s image-bearers and the role and place of humanity within creation. They clearly incorporate an ethical dimension in the interpretation of the *imago Dei* which is not only suitable, but also faithful to the biblical data. Human beings are accountable to God in their relationship with other creatures. They have a delegated power and authority. The image of the steward entails real limitations for humanity in its relationship with the rest of creation. Nevertheless, it needs other theological images and notions so as to exhibit specific content and assume clear goals.

It should be clear by now, that *kenosis* offers exactly the kind of corrective and complement that stewardship necessitates. The former provide three elements that the latter lacks of. Firstly, *kenosis* propounds a different kind of limit, which can shake up our imagination up and shed light upon our discernments in the search for new ways of life. While the notion of

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<sup>544</sup> Edwards, “Anthropocentrism and Its Ecological Critique. A Theological Response,” 119.; see also “Human and Other Creatures: Creation, Original Grace, and Original Sin.”

stewardship sets out a moral limit, which emerges from the fact that human beings are accountable to God for their administration of creation, *kenosis* displays a limit that is freely discerned, established, and respected in light of Jesus' self-giving love. In this sense, it activates and fosters ways of thinking, discernments, and attitudes, other than those that stewardship does. *Kenosis* portrays us *in medias res*, in the midst of a complex web of relationships made of processes of receiving, being nurtured, and sustained, but also processes of giving, limiting oneself, and letting-be. This viewpoint does not start with the person considered alone as a monad, but it sees every individual as already involved in kenotic relationships, receiving, giving, and making room for others. Thus, on the one hand, *kenosis* expresses better than the notion of stewardship our belonging to the earth community and our similarity with all creatures, and, on the other hand, it raises questions and discernments about our limits and self-giving attitudes well beyond what the metaphor of the steward can lead us toward. In other words, it voices better our identification with and distinction from other creatures. As a result, both the ethical and the performative dimensions of the *imago Dei* remain, but they acquire a different perspective and orientation. We are not mere stewards, extrinsically connected to other creatures, but we are rather tied up with the rest of creation through a myriad of ways of getting, receiving, and also giving and letting-be.

Secondly, the Christological meaning of *kenosis* as well as its usage in the theology of creation, makes clear that our relationship with other creatures should point toward the wellbeing and fulfillment of the entire earth community. While stewardship is rightly criticized for its lack of specific content, *kenosis* exhibits a clear orientation toward the flourishing of the whole creation. Through self-limitation and self-giving love we are called to understand and

exercise our power as power-in-love, which points to empowering others and enabling all creatures to move toward their fulfillment. *Kenosis* means that we not only freely set out and respect certain limits, as well as the integrity and autonomy of all forms of life, making room for them, but also establish life-giving relationships which aim ultimately at others' wellbeing and flourishing. The act of self-limitation is for the sake of the fulfillment and wellbeing of others, which is the purpose of divine self-giving love. *Kenosis* serves therefore as a specifier for an otherwise empty notion of stewardship.

Finally, *kenosis* is not something that we do, but rather something which happens to us within an encounter. Being created in the image of God implies for humanity the necessity to partake of a twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love. However, this is not something that we must bring about through mere will-power, but rather we are being conformed and renewed in the image of God inasmuch as we allow the Spirit of God to draw us into this twofold movement. While the notion of stewardship is likely to be interpreted in a deistic way, and hence "God can be removed from the scene as humans beings are given oversight of the earth and move to center stage in the drama of creation,"<sup>545</sup> *kenosis* makes present not only a distinctive understanding of divine agency in the God-creation relationship, but also puts at the center Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and so it reminds us that it is Jesus who has revealed God's true nature, and what it means to be truly human. Conversely to what the notion of stewardship may seem to imply, *kenosis* is not just "our business," but it is a twofold movement – self-limitation and self-giving love – in which we are driven by the Spirit of God. Accordingly, being more in tune with the contemporary understanding of God's grace

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<sup>545</sup> Himes and Himes, "The Sacrament of Creation Toward an Environmental Theology," 278.

than the metaphor of the steward, *kenosis* defines not only the relationship between human beings and other creatures, but is rather meant to inspire a meaningful and timely understanding of the complex relationships among the Creator, humanity and the rest of creatures.

Getting to the end of this project, I hope that I have been able to show that the notion of *kenosis* must come to the fore in theological reflection on humanity before the current ecological crisis. It is a meaningful, sound, and timely interpretation of the *imago Dei*, which not only intertwines the substantialist, relational, and functional understanding of what it means to be God's image-bearers, but it also serves them as specifier, giving them specific content and orientation. It is Jesus' own *kenosis* that reveals the true face of divine power – power in love – which decidedly aims at the wellbeing and fulfillment of creation. This twofold movement of self-limitation and self-giving love can certainly inspire the desirable renovation in theological anthropology. We need a new way of portraying humanity in relationship with other creatures and inhabiting the world. We are also looking for new ways of living that may lead us to true and fruitful life. *Kenosis* offers us a meaningful and timely image; one that deserves to be considered and deepened in the face of the challenges we are to deal with nowadays. *Kenosis* certainly enables theology to activate and foster discernments within the spheres of personal, social, and environmental ecology, which not only can change views that disconnect human beings from the rest of creation by ascribing to them an ambiguous dominion over other creatures, but it also can lead us toward more ecologically friendly ways of living.

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