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Theological anthropology and Christian ethics of creation: the human person, responsibility and the natural environment

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Abstract

This article addresses the contemporary anthropological and ecological crisis from a theological perspective, pointing to the need to renew the Christian vision of man and his relationship with creation. The reflection focuses on theological anthropology and Christian environmental ethics, interpreted in the light of the Church's magisterium, especially Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato si', and contemporary research published in the journal Studia Elckie.

The research method used is hermeneutical-theological in nature, combining an analysis of biblical and patristic sources with a comparative analysis of contemporary ethical and eco-theological reflection. The article shows that man – as imago Dei – is not the dominator of nature, but its participant and interpreter. In this sense, Christian anthropology forms the basis of ecological ethics, in which care for creation has a moral and spiritual dimension.

In three analytical parts, the author develops the concept of the transition from anthropocentrism to Christian ecocentrism, shows the moral dimension of caring for the world, and formulates a hermeneutics of the community of creation, integrating man, nature, and God into a single relational whole.

The conclusions indicate that the theology of creation is not an addition to moral theology, but an organic part of it: care for the world is a contemporary form of fulfilling the commandment of love. The article fits into the interdisciplinary profile of the ISIR Journal of Multidisciplinary, showing that contemporary theology can serve as a bridge between the natural sciences, ethics and Christian spirituality.

Keywords: *theological anthropology; Christian ethics; eco-theology; integral ecology; Laudato si'; Studia Elckie; man and creation; theological hermeneutics; ecological personalism; ecological sin*

Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis reveals not only environmental degradation, but also a profound anthropological crisis, consisting in the loss of awareness of man's place in creation. In the face of growing tensions between the natural world and technological culture, the question of the theological meaning of humanity and the moral foundations of man's relationship with nature is becoming increasingly pressing. It is in this perspective that theological anthropology and Christian ethics of creation take on key importance, forming the basis of a new, integral hermeneutics of reality.

In theological tradition, man was seen as *imago Dei* — the image of God, capable of understanding, loving and

cooperating with the Creator in the work of the world (Ratzinger, 2005). However, modernity, with its rationalistic anthropocentrism, transformed this idea into a project of domination over nature (White, 1967). This gave rise to a tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, which has become the focus of contemporary ethical debates. Christian theology, and in particular its anthropological strand, attempts to overcome this opposition through the category of *relational participation* — man is not so much the ruler of creation as its co-responsible interpreter (Francis, 2015).

In recent studies, including those in the Polish context, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the ecological dimension of anthropology. Authors publishing in *Studia Elckie* consistently show that care for creation is not an addition to Christian morality, but its internal dimension. As



Marek Kluz (2019) writes, "a Christian is not only a user of creation, but its co-creator, called to participate responsibly in God's work" (p. 118). Ryszard Sawicki (2020), in turn, points out that ecological sin is not an ideological category, but a moral consequence of the breakdown of the relationship between man, God and the world. In the same vein, Jerzy Fidura (2022) develops Pope Francis' concept of "integral ecology," noting that "man's relationship with nature is a reflection of his relationship with the Creator" (p. 93).

This theological line of research corresponds to global debates on the anthropology of ecology. Leonardo Boff (1995), in his classic work *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, presents man as a "priest of creation," responsible for its spiritual and material renewal. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955) emphasised that humanity is the culmination of cosmic evolution, whose goal is the deification of matter in Christ. Romano Guardini (1950) warned as early as the mid-20th century against "technical totalitarianism" leading to the alienation of man from nature. These insights have been taken up in the magisterial teaching of the Church, especially in the encyclical *Laudato si'* (Francis, 2015), in which the Pope formulates the concept of "integral ecology" — the unity between the good of man and the good of creation.

World literature increasingly emphasises that theological anthropology can provide the axiological basis for contemporary environmental ethics (Sison & Fontrodona, 2023; Melé, 2012). From a Christian perspective, the relationship between man and nature does not stem from the pragmatics of survival, but from participation in God's *agape* towards the world. Thus, the theology of the person becomes the theology of creation, and care for the world becomes a manifestation of spirituality in which freedom is inseparable from responsibility.

An analysis of texts published in *Studia Elckie* confirms that Polish theological thought is developing this trend towards integral ecological personalism. The works of Brozio (2021) and Zellma (2022) introduce the category of ecological spirituality as a form of education for responsible love. This direction of research corresponds to the postulates of contemporary schools of environmental ethics (Boersema, 2018; Berry, 2009), which emphasise the need for education in empathy towards creation.

The aim of this article is therefore to show that theological anthropology—understood as the study of man in relation to God and the world—is the key to formulating Christian ecological ethics. In this context, the study integrates a hermeneutical approach (analysis of biblical and patristic sources), an anthropological-moral approach (the person as a relational and moral being), and an eco-theological approach (interpretation of man as a participant in creation). The article fits into the thematic profile of *the ISIR Journal of Multidisciplinary*, which aims to combine the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Method and research perspective

The study is based on a hermeneutical-theological method, integrating the analysis of source texts with anthropological and ethical interpretation. This approach assumes that theology is not merely a system of doctrines, but a process of understanding revelation in the context of human experience and history (Ricoeur, 1990). The hermeneutics of sources allows us to read the biblical image of man (*imago Dei*) not in a metaphysical sense, but in a relational sense — as a call to participate in God's creative and salvific activity.

Elements of comparative analysis were also used, juxtaposing classical texts of the patristic and magisterial traditions (including St. Irenaeus of Lyon, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Paul II, Francis) with contemporary reflections on environmental ethics (Berry, 2009; Boff, 1995; Boersema, 2018). The comparative approach allows us to grasp the continuity in the development of the idea of creation and to identify the changes that have taken place in the understanding of the relationship between man and the world.

The third methodological pillar is theological-moral analysis, which, in the spirit of Catholic social ethics, interprets ecological responsibility as a moral category, not just a pragmatic one. The inspiration here is both *Laudato si'* (Francis, 2015) and the concept of the virtue of moderation in the scholastic tradition, interpreted in the context of contemporary virtue theology (Melé, 2012; Kluz, 2019).

The research perspective adopted is anthropological and theological in nature. It assumes that any reflection on the natural world and environmental ethics must stem from an integral understanding of man as a person created in the image of God, and therefore as a relational being capable of love and responsibility (Ratzinger, 2005; Fidura, 2022). Man is not opposed to nature, but is its "icon of rational meaning," thanks to which he can read the world as a book of creation.

This methodology corresponds to the interdisciplinary profile of *the ISIR Journal of Multidisciplinary*, which promotes the integration of theology with the social and natural sciences. This makes it possible to create a research model in which theology does not isolate itself from the contemporary challenges of science, but enters into dialogue with them while maintaining its own epistemological identity.

Man as the image of God in creation

In biblical and theological terms, man is created "in the image and likeness of God" (*imago Dei*, Genesis 1:26-28). The tradition of the Church has interpreted this formula not only as an ontological definition of man, but above all as a call to participate in God's work of creation. Man has been endowed with reason and freedom, which make him a participant in God's creativity. As Joseph Ratzinger (2005) writes, "the image of God in man means the capacity for relationship, dialogue and responsibility for the world" (p. 42).

In this sense, theological anthropology does not describe man as the dominator of nature, but as its interpreter and collaborator. In his reflection contained in *Studia Elckie*, Marek Kluz (2019) points out that in the light of Christianity,

"man receives the world not to rule over it, but to participate in it in a reasonable and moral way" (p. 120). This mode of participation – based on relationship rather than domination – lays the foundations for the theological concept of integral ecology.

Biblical theology understands creation as *communio*, a community of existence in which every being has value in itself because it comes from God (Francis, 2015). The anthropology of participation, developed by Teilhard de Chardin (1955), emphasises that human beings are not strangers to the cosmos, but rather its centre of consciousness, called to cooperate in the process of the spiritual evolution of the world. This "cosmic humanism" does not oppose man to nature, but includes him in its development, interpreting ecology as a spiritual dimension.

Polish theologians – especially the authors of *the Elk Studies* – take up this tradition from a moral perspective. Ryszard Sawicki (2020) points out that ecological sin is a violation of the harmony of creation and an expression of ingratitude towards God. Jerzy Fidura (2022) adds that ecological ethics must stem from human spirituality: "man protects the world when he discovers God's trace in it and recognises himself as part of it" (p. 95).

It follows that *imago Dei* is not an abstract concept, but a practical and moral one: man, as the image of God, is called to be a witness to His love for creation. This understanding of anthropology is the starting point for ecological ethics, in which care for nature is a form of responsibility for oneself, for others and for future generations.

As Brozio (2021) notes, ecological spirituality is not an alternative to prayer or the sacraments, but their natural complement. In this perspective, creation appears as a space for contemplating God and participating in His work. This approach gives theological anthropology a new dimension – a cosmic-liturgical one, in which man not only speaks about God, but also *worships Him through the world*.

From anthropocentrism to Christian ecocentrism

One of the most debated issues in contemporary moral and ecological theology is the tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. For many centuries, theology, influenced by the interpretation of Genesis ("subdue the earth" — Gen 1:28), emphasised the primacy of man as the crown of creation. This view, especially in the modern era, has been reduced to a dominant anthropocentrism that sanctioned the exploitation and objectification of nature in the name of civilisational progress (White, 1967). As a result, a model of technical culture emerged in which man sees himself as an autonomous demiurge rather than as a co-creator and guardian of creation.

Meanwhile, Christian theological anthropology—in its deepest sense—has never equated dominion with violence, but with responsibility. As Romano Guardini (1950) reminds us, man's power over the world is a gift that becomes morally justified only when it remains in the service of the common

good of creation. In the same line of thought, Ratzinger (2005) points out that true human power is "servant-like, not hegemonic," because it stems from participation in God's intelligent love for the world (p. 67).

In recent decades, there has been a need to overcome the false opposition between *anthropocentrism* and *ecocentrism*. The encyclical *Laudato si'* (Francis, 2015) introduces the concept of **integrated anthropocentrism**, which assumes that man is part of the natural environment, not its owner. "There is no ecology without a proper anthropology," writes the Pope (no. 118), emphasising that the source of the ecological crisis is a distorted image of man detached from his relationship with God and the world. This perspective allows us to avoid both reductive anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, which absolutises nature at the expense of the human person.

In Polish reflection, especially in the pages of *Studia Elckie*, this direction has been taken up in the spirit of relational hermeneutics. Marek Kluz (2019) points out that Christianity does not propose the rejection of anthropocentrism, but its purification through the category of responsibility: "Man remains the centre of creation, but only as the one who cares for it in the name of the Creator" (p. 122). Jerzy Fidura (2022), in turn, develops Pope Francis' concept of "integral ecology," noting that one cannot speak of ecology without spirituality: "ecology without anthropology becomes ideology, spirituality without ecology becomes abstraction" (p. 97).

In this context, Ryszard Sawicki (2020) proposes the concept of *Christian ecocentrism*, understood not as a depreciation of man, but as his inclusion in the relational community of creation. "Humans are not the opposite of nature, but its conscious participants" (p. 80). This interpretation restores theological harmony between anthropology and cosmology: humans retain their central place, but in the dimension of service and responsibility.

This perspective is also developed by contemporary concepts of ecological personalism (Sison & Fontrodona, 2023; Melé, 2012), which assume that environmental ethics should grow out of the anthropology of the person. The person, as a being capable of relationship, represents the whole created world before God and includes it in the space of love. Therefore, any form of environmental degradation is also a moral impoverishment of humanity (Berry, 2009).

In the theological hermeneutics of creation, man appears as a "microcosm" – a place where all creation finds voice and meaning (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955). Hence, concern for the world is not an alternative to spirituality, but its necessary dimension. As Dariusz Brozio (2021) emphasises, "Christian ecological spirituality is born in the contemplation of God present in creation, not in ideological activism" (p. 54).

Christian ecocentrism, unlike eco-philosophical trends that deny the uniqueness of man, assumes the simultaneous affirmation of the dignity of the person and the sanctity of nature. It is only in man's relationship with God and the world that ethical fulfilment can exist, in which dominion becomes responsibility and technology becomes a tool for the common

good. In this sense, Christian anthropology, reinterpreted in the light of integral ecology, is the most adequate theological response to the challenges of the present day.

The moral dimension of care for creation

Christian ecological ethics assumes that care for the natural world is a moral obligation arising from the very essence of humanity. Man, as a being created in the image of God, is called not only to use the goods of the earth, but above all to cultivate them responsibly. In this perspective, care for the natural environment is a form of love for one's neighbour and an expression of obedience to God's command to "subdue the earth" (Genesis 1:28), understood not as a right to exploit, but as an invitation to participate in the work of creation (Francis, 2015).

Contemporary theological reflection increasingly emphasises that the ecological dimension should be included at the very heart of Christian morality. In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis defines ecological sin as "an action or omission against our common home" (no. 8). Underlying this concept is the recognition that creation is not neutral matter, but an "icon of God" that deserves respect and love. By destroying nature, man violates not only the biological balance, but also his spiritual relationship with God (Ratzinger, 2005).

Ryszard Sawicki (2020) emphasises that ecological sin has both a personal and a social dimension, as it results from a loss of awareness of the sacredness of the world: "when man forgets that the world is a gift, he treats it as a commodity rather than a space of grace" (p. 83). In this context, there is a need for a theological interpretation of ecology as a space for conversion — *metanoia* — in which man rediscovers his place in the cosmic order of creation.

The Elk Studies reflect on the concept of "ecological virtues" — such as moderation, gratitude, humility and solidarity — which allow the theology of creation to be translated into the language of moral practice. Marek Kluz (2019) writes that "a person who cares for the environment participates in the work of sanctifying the world; ecology is a place of everyday holiness" (p. 126). Moderation, understood in the spirit of classical virtue ethics, protects man from consumerist selfishness, while gratitude and humility restore an attitude of contemplation rather than domination.

Dariusz Brozio (2021) points out that ecological spirituality constitutes a space for the "liturgy of creation" — the daily experience of God present in the world. In this sense, prayer, fasting and responsible ecological asceticism are not a negation of the world, but an affirmation of it as a gift. A person who prays, works and cares for nature participates in the very act of glorifying God, in which creation becomes a "sacrament of presence" (Fidura, 2022).

However, this moral dimension of care for creation cannot be limited to individual spirituality. It is social and institutional in nature. As Melé (2012) notes, Christian ethics must also be organisational and economic ethics, in which economic decisions are subordinated to the principle of the common good. Ecological responsibility therefore concerns not only

individuals, but also communities, businesses and states, which have a duty to protect the "moral structure of the world" (Guardini, 1950).

From a theological point of view, caring for creation is an act of continuing God's work — participating in *creatio continua*. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955) wrote, "every act of love towards the world contributes to its deification" (p. 274). Man becomes God's co-worker when he develops the world in a spirit of wisdom and responsibility. In this sense, ecological ethics is a form of "ecclesial asceticism" — an expression of communal solidarity with all creation.

According to papal teaching and the reflections of theologians of *the Elk Studies*, ecological morality is not a new moral category, but a deepening of traditional virtues in the context of contemporary challenges. Humility, moderation, gratitude and solidarity — these classic attitudes — take on ecological significance today. As Fidura (2022) put it, "integral ecology is the theology of virtues in action" (p. 100). Care for the created world thus becomes a form of love practised on a planetary scale — a love that is not limited to human beings, but encompasses the entire cosmos, which is God's work.

Hermeneutics of the community of creation

Contemporary theology, especially since the publication of the encyclical *Laudato si'* (Francis, 2015), increasingly interprets the reality of creation in terms of community. This means that the entire cosmos — from the smallest particle to human beings — participates in a single order of being, in which relationality is a fundamental dimension of existence. This hermeneutics of community can be considered a theological complement to relational anthropology, developed by Ratzinger (2005) and de Lubac (1946), and, more recently, by Fidura (2022) and Sawicki (2020), who point out that man's relationship with nature is a reflection of his relationship with God.

The hermeneutics of the community of creation presupposes the transcendence of the human-nature dualism. It is therefore not a return to pantheistic dispersion, but an affirmation of the sacramental dimension of reality. The world, as Guardini (1950) wrote, is not the opposite of the spirit, but its "icon" (p. 57). In this perspective, every creature is a sign of God's presence, and man is the interpreter of this sign. Theology that adopts this hermeneutics becomes a dialogical science, capable of conversing with both the natural sciences and contemporary philosophy (Jonas, 1984; Berry, 2009).

In the spirit of *the Elk Studies*, the hermeneutics of the community of creation also takes on a pastoral and educational dimension. Andrzej Zellma (2022) notes that "ecological Christian formation must lead not only to knowledge, but also to an attitude — to an ecological conversion that transforms the way of life" (p. 211). This means that it is necessary to develop ethical and spiritual sensitivity towards the world as a gift. Brozio (2021) adds that in this sense, the Church community becomes a laboratory of integral ecology: liturgy, prayer and diakonia realise the spiritual unity of man and creation in Christ.

From a theological point of view, the hermeneutics of the community of creation is an expression of the "cosmic dimension of salvation" — a doctrine already developed by the Church Fathers. St. Irenaeus of Lyons and Gregory of Nyssa emphasised that redemption encompasses not only man but the whole world, for "God desires that all things be fulfilled in Him" (cf. Eph 1:10). In modern times, this idea is taken up by Teilhard de Chardin (1955), who presents Christ as *the Omega Point* — the centre where the spiritual development of the universe is concentrated. By participating in this community, human beings cooperate with the grace that permeates the cosmos.

In this hermeneutics, all elements of theology—anthropology, ethics, spirituality, and cosmology—form a coherent whole. There is no longer a division between "theology of creation" and "moral theology"; both are aspects of one reality—the relationship between God, man, and the world. As Fidura (2022) aptly puts it, "the community of creation is a moral community, not just a biological one—every human action has cosmic consequences" (p. 102).

Conclusion – Synthetic conclusions

Theological anthropology and Christian ethics of creation present man as a relational being who fulfils his calling in responsible care for the world. In contrast to modern anthropocentrism, the Christian vision of man is based on participation, not domination. The human person is an "icon of God" and therefore a call to co-create, not to appropriate.

This study shows that contemporary theology, both globally and in Poland, is moving towards **an integral model of eco-theology** that combines anthropology, ethics and spirituality. Articles published in *Studia Elckie* prove that Polish theological thought is part of the international debate on "ecological personalism" (Kluz, 2019; Sawicki, 2020; Fidura, 2022).

In light of the analysis, three synthetic research conclusions can be formulated:

1. **Theological anthropology** is the foundation of integral ecology because it defines man as a participant, not a dominator of creation.
2. **Christian environmental ethics** stems from spirituality and virtues—not from ideology, but from a moral commitment to God and the world.
3. **The hermeneutics of the community of creation** is a new paradigm of theology that enables dialogue between faith, science and culture in the context of global ecological challenges.

In this sense, care for creation is not only a moral task, but a spiritual dimension of salvation: it is human participation in the work of redemption of the entire cosmos. As Teilhard de Chardin (1955) wrote, "The cosmic Christ is not a metaphor, but a reality in which the world is permeated with grace." Christian ecological anthropology thus becomes a theology of hope—hope for the renewal of the world through the transformation of humanity.

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