The Book of Revelation and the Natural Environment

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Nineteen hundred years have passed since, according to tradition as well as scientific research, the Book of the Apocalypse was written at the island of Patmos by St John. During this long period the book has never ceased to exercise fascination over its readers, both inside and outside the Church. This is due to the style as well as the content of the book. The style is marked by heavy and complex symbolism, which lends itself to uncountable interpretations allowing the imagination often to 'go wild', while the content refers to such upheavals in the existing historical as well as natural order that 'apocalypse' has become identical with the worst catastrophe that we can refer to.

All this explains a great deal of what Church history tells us about this book. The hesitation of the official Church to include it in the scriptural canon for many centuries is one of the notable facts. Another is the remarkable silence imposed on this book as is evident from the lack of Patristic commentaries on it for about eight centuries. Finally, the sudden and widespread exploitation of the book in the Middle Ages particularly in the West, to support all sorts of religious ideas, usually marked by fanaticism and extraordinary psychological manifestations, has given the book a mysterious character. Even among the orthodox of our time, in spite of the true spirit of the Orthodox tradition to be found in the Greek Fathers, a fanatical rhetoric is being spread among the faithful, particularly in connection with the number 666, that makes of the Apocalypse a terrifying and in some cases irrational text.

As an alternative to this frenetical approach, Biblical scholarship in the last few decades has enabled us to look at this book with more sober eyes. Thus, with regard to its symbolic images we know that they all come from Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic language and they are meant to cover up references to contemporary historical realities - especially ones related to Rome and its persecutions of the early Christians - so that the book might not provoke the wrath of the civil authorities. These symbolisms were therefore not meant to be 'mystical' in a 'Pythagorean' sense, but vehicles of communication among the faithful of the early communities versed in the Jewish tradition and in its later apocalyptic imagery.

The other important point that has emerged from Biblical research is that the main symbolic imagery of the book comes from the liturgical experience of its readers, particularly in the form of the Eucharist. One can say without exaggeration that the Book of the Apocalypse is a eucharistic liturgy or a commentary on such a liturgy. Without the liturgy this book remains incomprehensible or is seriously misunderstood.

Finally, it must be underlined that it is the theology of the book that matters in the end, not its symbolism. The book must be approached hermeneutically, that is, with reference to its diachronical existential significance. The book intends to put forward messages of ultimate significance for the life of the world, and it is to these that we must turn our attention.

What does the Revelation tell us about the ecological crisis of our time? We can only answer this question if we dig deep in the theology of the book. Some of its fundamental theological principles bearing directly on ecology are in my view the following.

History viewed eschatologically

One aspect of this principle is that all historical reality must have some *ultimate* significance. Nothing is wasted. Even evil contributes to the final purpose of history. It is a fundamental Biblical belief shared also by the author of the Apocalypse, that Satan is a servant of God's purposes; he is used by God to bring about the fulfilment of His will.[1] Later on in the Patristic period and under the influence of Platonism evil came to be regarded as *me on*, that is, a mere negation or absence of the good. But even then the belief survived that what happens in history, whether good or evil, forms part of a purpose which is to be revealed in the end.

The prophet - and John certainly claims to be a prophet - is given by God the charisma to reveal to us this ultimate significance. If prophecy makes no sense without history, since it is nothing but an interpretation

of it, equally history ceases to be history unless it has a meaning, that is, unless it is somehow linked with prophecy.

This eschatological approach to history, therefore, involves an *apocalypsis*. This Greek word means an 'uncovering', or 'unveiling' - no doubt of the ultimate significance of historical events. Why did the term *apocalypsis* acquire the meaning of 'catastrophe'? Simply because the uncovering of many historical events, notably those of a negative character, will be marked by the revelation of their failure to prevail. *Apocalypsis* is therefore the final attempt of evil to impose itself on history as a reality, and it is this that makes evil so threatening at the apocalyptic time. The 'unveiling' of evil, historically often mistaken for good, is a necessary aspect of eschatology due to the factor of freedom. Freedom underlies all evil. This makes *apocalypsis* take the form of a real clash between good and evil.

Now the purpose of prophecy is not simply to satisfy foreknowledge, but to call us to repentance. Prophecy in the Bible is not to provide us with knowledge, but *to make us act*, by changing our attitudes and behaviour; it is like other charisms for the edification of the Church[2] and the world at large. Certainly this is the intention of the author of the Book of the Apocalypse.

History viewed cosmologically

One of the novelties of the Book of the Apocalypse is that it introduces cosmology into eschatology. It is commonly accepted that the Hebrew mind was conditioned historically, while the Greeks had a more cosmological interest. With all the qualifications that one should add to this general thesis, its main claim remains true. Judaism in its eschatology was interested basically in the final outcome of the history of Israel. The author of the Apocalypse, although brought up in this spirit of Judaeo-Christian apocalypticism, is also interested in the natural world, not only as a source from which to draw his symbolism but as a reality in itself. He thus describes the effect of the last days on the natural elements and he speaks of a 'new heaven' and a 'new earth' as part of the eschatological vision. This is extremely important. It introduces - for the first time - what we may call *cosmological prophecy* into the Judaeo-Christian tradition. A Christian is now called on to think of the Kingdom of God not only in terms of the salvation of the human being, but also in terms of the survival and wellbeing of the entire creation.

This did not prove to be an easy matter in the course of Church history. Already in the 3rd century AD Origen had put this eschatology into doubt by teaching that the material creation was the outcome of the fall, and that it is the spiritual world which will finally survive. Methodius of Olympus in the beginning of the 4th century wrote a treatise to refute this view and stressed the belief that God created the material world not in order to let it perish but to live forever. Yet about a century later in the West the great theologian Augustine saw the kingdom of God as a place where only human souls would exist, and the following he has enjoyed in this position has been persistent, at least in Western Christianity. By contrast, the cosmological dimension was stressed in the anthropology of theologians such as Maximus the Confessor (7th century AD) in the East, but the tendency to think anthropocentrally has also been observable there, even up to our own time. This anthropocentrism (we could call it anthropomonism) must have contributed greatly to the appearance of the ecological problem. It is of paramount importance for ecology that our Christian tradition replace anthropomonism with a cosmologically conditioned view of the human being, in line with the cosmological propheticism of the Apocalypse.

History and cosmology

One of the basic characteristics of the text of the Apocalypse is its universalistic eschatology. By the term 'universalistic' we do not wish to refer to theories of universal salvation or *apokotastasis*, but the simple fact that the author of the Apocalypse sees the ultimate significance of history as involving all peoples of the world. The 'Lamb of God' is presented by John as the only person worthy to unseal the book of history and reveal its ultimate meaning 'because he was slain and bought us for God in his blood *from every race and language and people and nation*'.[3]

The importance of this universal eschatology for our subject hardly needs to be stressed. The ecological crisis more than any other problem of humanity, reveals the truth that the world forms one community, and that even the slightest violation of nature in one part of the world leads inevitably to consequences affecting the rest of the world. The Book of Revelation with its universal eschatology unveils before us the ultimate

solidarity of the human race and calls us to common action for the protection of the natural environment regardless of differences. In the end we shall all be one because the world in which we live is one.

The world is a liturgy

The Book of the Apocalypse is a liturgical book. By 'liturgical' we mean that it takes a view of the world with specific characteristics.

It is a movement, a dynamic reality. It is not a static reproduction of a fixed prototype as it was conceived by Platonism. It is neither recycled and reproduced eternally. Like the Byzantine eucharistic liturgy, it is a movement towards an end, a final purpose. Its natural resources are thus neither endless nor purposeless; they are 'sacred' in that they have a sacred purpose for which they exist. Each of its elements, no matter how small, is sanctified through the sacred purpose which lies within it.

It is a relational reality. No part of the world can be conceived in itself apart from its relation with the other parts. The world is thus like a picture, and this is how St John sees it in the Apocalypse, particularly in chapters 4-5. If you remove or destroy one bit of it, you destroy the whole picture.

It needs a priest, someone who will freely unify it and refer it back to its Creator. Man is the 'priest of creation', the one who is called to treat the world not only with respect but also with *creativity* so that its parts may form a whole and this whole may transcend its boundaries by being brought into relation with God. This makes the human being *indispensable* for creation. The axiom promoted by most ecologists that Man needs nature, but nature does not need Man does not have a place in a liturgical view of the world. On the contrary if we take seriously what natural science now calls 'the anthropic principle' we must give to the human being an indispensable role in creation. It is a role not only in the world's preservation but also its *cultivation* so that its ultimate meaning and purpose may be revealed (*apokalypsis*) through the human being.

Conclusion

These observations are not meant to exhaust the vast subject indicated. They are intended simply to underline some basic principles of the theology of the Book of Revelation, which in my view are of special importance to those wishing to approach the ecological problem at its deepest level. For it is my firm conviction that the solution of the ecological problem is not simply a matter of management and technicalities, important as these may be. It is a matter of changing our spiritual attitudes, indeed of *changing our very world-view*. The Book of the Apocalypse is pertinent to this task.

In the first place it calls us to think eschatologically. Unfortunately in our culture the eschatological outlook has been replaced by a present-dominated mentality. We have expelled the future from our way of thinking and we tend to exhaust our interest in what the world can offer us *now*. Apocalypse calls us to become future-orientated in our culture. This is extremely important for ecology.

Secondly, the cosmological outlook which Revelation introduces into its concept of history calls us to revise our understanding of sin. We are used to regard sin mainly in anthropological or social terms. But there is also a sin against nature, since evil upsets the created order as a whole. Cosmology must enter our ethic, and this calls for a revolution in our education, our sermons and our textbooks.

Thirdly, Revelation calls us to realise the universal character of the world's fate. The world is a unity and humanity is in the end but one. The slogan 'one world or none' is supported by the theology of the Apocalypse.

Finally, the Book of Revelation invites us to acquire a *liturgical* ethos in the broad sense of the term. We must behave 'liturgically', that is, treat the world as a sacred reality possessing ultimate meaning and entrusted to us not for consumption but for cultivation and protection of this ultimate meaning. We are priests and not lords or even managers of creation.

This is 'what the Spirit says to the Churches' at a time of ecological crisis. On our way to Patmos let us listen to the voice of the Apocalypse carefully. It is particularly relevant to our contemporary problems.

[1] *cf* The story of Job

[2] 1 Corinthians 12, 3

[3] Revelation 5:9