

# In Academia for the Church

Eastern and Central European Theological Perspectives

Edited by

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## CHAPTER 5

# A Growing Need for a Common Moral Vision: A Cry for Humble Co-operation between Theology and Other Disciplines

István Pásztori-Kupán

I argue in this paper that while the planet is running towards a social and ecological disaster, the influential public actors, including the theologians, have been nurturing their own illusions. The political classes hoped to discover the answer for the environmental crisis in the illusory idea of 'sustainable development'. Scientists avoided the responsibility by referring to 'scientific neutrality'. Theology itself often followed a similarly illusory self definition by considering itself as 'the conscience' of other sciences.

However, the present economic crisis, caused primarily by moral decline, wakes us all from our illusions. It is a clear consequence of our interdependence as scholars that from an ethical perspective scientists, economists, politicians, etc., can never be neutral: this moral responsibility can neither be devolved to others, nor taken over from them. Philosophy should not be a handmaid, but rather the ally of theology for the sake of the *homo ethicus*.

## *All are One?*

Our way of life influences both directly and indirectly all other creatures of the earth. As the capacity of living rationally and reflecting on our influence on other creatures of the planet is a characteristic exclusive of the human race, we have a non-negligible and non-transferable responsibility for our shared habitat. The question becomes unavoidable: are we able to live responsibly or are we merely living as tyrants and parasites on a sensitive planet, which is neither infinite, nor indestructible?

'All are one' according to Heraclitus. This ancient wisdom drew attention to the interdependence of all things. This idea has its resonances in the New Testament, too.

Paul, speaking in front of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens, reminds us that God has made all nations 'of one blood', determining beforehand their times and the bounds of their habitation. Interestingly enough, in order to emphasize the mutual interdependence of all people who had descended from 'the one', Paul does not quote the Old Testament, but rather the Cilician poet Aratus, according to whom we are 'God's offspring'.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament the term *patria* denotes 'nation' or 'race' (see Luke 2:4, Acts 3:25, Eph 3:14–15). Nevertheless, in post-biblical times – and perhaps not without the influence of Acts 17:26 – the term also came to be used in the sense of *habitat*, as an inheritance received by humankind from the *Pater* (i.e. the Father). This is where the Indo-European words *patria* and *patrimonium* as well as the German term *Vaterland* derive from.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, all is one, or at least, according to the biblical teaching, all originate from and gain the inheritance from the same father. Yet, seen from the perspective of two millennia, have we actually grown to bear the responsibility of this honour? The on-going military confrontations, the exclusively profit-oriented industrialization and the insatiability of multinational companies keep tearing apart both our societies and the

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1. See Acts 17:26–28.

2. The Hungarian language uses the expression 'motherland' showing the close connection between human beings and the world: the *mother* is from whom one gains his/her *matter* (in Latin, *mater* is the source of *material*).

earth. In today's fragmented world we need to learn the lesson of unity again, since due to the globalization all our decisions and actions affect the lives of others who may live on the opposite side of this small planet.

### ***Sustainable Development: Plans and Illusions***

Another way of defining our responsibility towards the earth and each other is that we do not simply inherit our habitat from our ancestors, but rather borrow it from our children.<sup>3</sup> In the name of universal human solidarity, the above admonition brings every human generation to trial not only in front of the Lord of history, but also before the court of their descendants. The future of our children and grandchildren is decided now: we recklessly participate in the formation of their fate, even with our indolence. Perhaps it has never been so crucial whether the current generation is actually able to preserve its inheritance and pass it on by living consciously in order to prevent their grandchildren from fighting over drinking water. At this point we are unmistakably faced with the biblical challenge of feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish.<sup>4</sup>

Whenever I discuss with my students the inequality and injustice that are so unmistakably present in our world, I usually refer to a satellite image on the NASA webpage of our planet at night. The presence and absence of artificial lights shows exactly where the Orwellian 'equals' and 'the more equals' live.<sup>5</sup>

Economics and politics offer the global remedy for such problems in the idea of 'sustainable development'. This idea is contained in the so-called *Bruntland Report* (1987) of the United Nations. According to its definition,

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3. Cf. Mawis Lewis-Webber, "Young Children and Environmental Ethics", *Environmental Education at the Early Childhood Level*, ed. by Ruth A. Wilson (Troy: North American Association for Environmental Education, 1994), pp. 23–27.

4. John 6:1–15.

5. <http://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap001127.html>, viewed on 18 May 2011. Cf. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Chapter 10: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."



Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the continuation is not very encouraging, since according to the document, the idea of sustainable development contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.<sup>7</sup>

It was clear already at the time of the report's formulation, that the 'needs' of the present largely exceed the limited resources of our planet, because the 'needs' of humankind are increasingly dictated by the profit-oriented market. This wildly strengthening *dictatorship of artificial and market-centred needs* or rather 'claims' is in total contradiction with the requirements of a responsible attitude towards the next generation. It is *artificial*, because it generates unreal needs;<sup>8</sup> it is *market-centred*, because it is based exclusively on profit-making without any ethical bounds;<sup>9</sup> and it is a *dictatorship*, because it enters mercilessly into the everyday life and home of every family and social class.<sup>10</sup>

The first concept puts forward the essential need of the world's poor, which is indeed commendable. Nevertheless, the biggest problem with the second statement is that the subject of the sentence is 'the state of technology and social organization' and not 'the environment' itself. According to the

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6. *UN Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, Part I, Chapter II: Towards Sustainable Development. <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>, accessed on 18 May 2013.

7. *Ibid.*, Part I, Chapter II.

8. E.g. it makes a seven-year-old child believe that he/she desperately 'needs' a mobile phone equipped with the latest multimedia extras on the market.

9. In an exclusively profit-oriented commerce the question whether one should sell a refrigerator to the Eskimos does not even occur. Instead, only one thing matters: how can I persuade the Eskimos to buy this product?

10. E.g. the young children already in possession of a multimedia mobile phone often ostracize those who do not have one. The children who want to be accepted by their classmates, approach their parents with the claim (which they consider entirely justified), thus introducing inevitably the dictatorship of the market and of fashion into the life of the family.

logic of this affirmation, the state of technology and social organization defines the limits of the ecosystem regarding the satisfaction of human needs, and not the ecosystem itself. The document which originated from within the so called consumer-society tries to avoid the unavoidable: within its opening statement it does not state clearly that we have to adapt and adjust our real needs to the possibilities of the planet and not vice versa. It is not the technology, but the environment itself that sets the limits of our possibilities: the inexistent cannot be exploited. The document attempts to make the notion of sustainable development believable by the progress of various technologies and worldwide social justice, without facing the decisive question: do we actually need everything we have or we are claiming we need? Further: do we need everything we have in such quantities? Do we need everything so frequently? The unsustainable character of such development derives exactly from the relentlessness of the market's dictatorship.

Two and a half decades before the proclamation of the above UN document, on 10 July 1963, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy affirmed in his commencement address at the American University:

In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy's thoughts are commendable. It is evident from the above that one cannot even begin to think about the future of our planet and of humankind without a thorough ethical reflection. This must begin with the inescapable redefinition of our needs and claims, but not according to the demands of the market, but rather in light of our responsibility towards our descendants and this small 'patria' of all. Only this process may facilitate the formation and strengthening of a truly Christian, human and environmental ethics, realizable by a conscious change in our habits. The education of a generation with a strong sense of responsibility for the next

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11. John F. Kennedy, *Commencement Address at American University*, Washington, DC, 10 June 1963. [http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/speeches/index.php?page=jfk\\_at\\_american](http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/speeches/index.php?page=jfk_at_american), accessed on 18 May 2013.

ones cannot be successful without the development of a morally correct attitude vis-à-vis another human being and the environment.

### *The Illusion of Moral Development*

As is demonstrated by the entire history of humankind and especially by the whole of the twentieth century, we must give up the illusion of 'sustainable development' not only in the economical but also in ethical sense. Those ideas of the Enlightenment according to which the introduction of universal education will result in global happiness, and the spreading of knowledge and science will produce an ever-increasing morality, were proven to be illusions. The moral flaws of human beings are more fundamental than the Enlightenment philosophers envisaged.

Even without invoking the affirmations of theological anthropology regarding the basic nature of human beings, we may safely conclude that there has not been any substantial improvements on the moral level within humankind during the past two thousand and especially during the last one hundred years. The school history manuals often present the slavery of the age of Pericles as one of the 'flaws' of ancient Greek democracy. Nevertheless, based on the demonstrative lesson of history, we should know by now that slavery is not merely a flaw or a stain, but rather an indispensable accessory of democracy. The only important difference is that while the people of the ancient polis honestly acknowledged this fact and the masters lived together with their slaves (even at times under the same roof), today we strive to keep our slaves on other continents so as not to be disturbed by their mere presence. Our democracy is certainly more presentable, yet not peculiarly more human than those of old: ever so often it merely neutralizes our moral sensibility with the required elegance. The celebrated enlightenment rationality thus easily leads to inhuman solutions.

## *The Illusion of a Morally Neutral Science*

The notion of *scientific neutrality* is not only present, but often plays a crucial role in our time. This usually involves the idea that through its objective methods science formulates its valid affirmations concerning the analyzed reality, presenting the discoveries and developments. Moreover, with political help it may also introduce its innovations. During these processes the ethical responsibility does not always burden the scientist. Nonetheless, my rationale in this matter is the following:

1. Science and knowledge are power.
2. The cultivation of science is an exercise of power.
3. The exercise of power involves moral accountability.
4. Any moral accountability resulting from the exercise of power is inevitable and non-transferable, including the assumption of responsibility for any consequences.

Thus, if anyone discovers and makes atomic energy available, he or she has to take into account that this innovation can be used not only for production, but also for terrible destruction. For example, atomic scientists as well as geneticists cannot and should not avoid extremely serious moral dilemmas. Their recurrent ethical problem is that with political support they can obtain a substantial income even at the cost of jeopardizing the health of the population either by improperly used atomic energy or by the production of genetically modified foods and plants. I think that the affirmation of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the 'father' of the first atomic bomb, is still worthy of our consideration:

The physics which played the decisive part in the development of the atomic bomb came straight out of our laboratories and our journals. Despite the vision and the far-seeing wisdom of our wartime heads of state, the physicists felt a peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons, as they were in fact used, dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no

vulgarity, no humour, no over-statement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most crucial messages of this shocking text is that Oppenheimer chooses to define the moral responsibility of atomic scientists neither by juridical nor by psychological terms. He does not speak of ‘error’, ‘mistake’, ‘fault’ or ‘misconduct’, but rather uses an unmistakable and extremely laden theological expression when he says that “the physicists have known *sin*”, and regardless of how they would desire to get rid of it, this knowledge is now inseparable from them. They cannot and perhaps should not lose this knowledge. This is a huge memento as well as a powerful prophetic warning.

We can draw similar conclusions from the recent history of scientific economics. The most distinguished economic universities of the world have published manuals in order to prevent the economic crises.<sup>13</sup> It was interesting to observe that behind the almost fatal collapse of the world economy which started on 15 September 2008, there were numerous specialists and businessmen who had previously spoken about various methods to prevent such disasters.<sup>14</sup> Again, the conclusion is the same: scientific methods in themselves are not enough. Science without a robust morality inevitably fails in the long run.

Upon analyzing the future of life and humankind, the health of our planet as well as the expected moral and human behaviour of the next generations, the scientific responsibility – or better said, the lack of the

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12. J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Physics in the Contemporary World”, in *Arthur Dehon Little memorial lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 25 November 1947 (Cambridge, MA, 1947). Cf. J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Physics in the Contemporary World”, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1948), pp. 65–68 and pp. 85–86 (p. 66). In his interview given to *Time* magazine he also expressed himself in the same manner. See “Expiation,” *Time*, p. 94 (23 February 1948), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,798265,00.html>, accessed on 18 May 2013.

13. See e.g. *Harvard Business Review on Crisis Management* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000). The first edition of the work appeared in 1994.

14. The reality is certainly more complex and troubling than that which was revealed in the 2010 documentary entitled *Inside Job*. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1645089/>, viewed on 18 May 2013.

assumption of responsibility by the sciences and scientists – can easily have devastating consequences. The typical question of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the recurrent “Why not?”, “Why should we not do this or that simply because we are capable of doing it?” – can lead humankind and life itself to destruction. The enormous amount of new technology introduced often within uncontrolled circumstances or based on falsified experimental data, the ever-deepening chasm between ‘equals’ and ‘more equals’ make us realize that we have a deficit on the level of conscious moral education, and that the public immorality is gradually becoming the contemporary ethos, thus threatening to eliminate our stimulus-threshold of morality which could still move us upon seeing the need of others and the injustices they suffer. One of the worrying results of our waning morality is that by merely reading or watching the daily news we come to accept more and more terrible things as commonplaces. These anomalies, which derive also from the immorality of pseudo-scientific behaviour, can only be annihilated on the social level by a serious ethical education of responsible, grown-up citizens.

The scientists and sciences of our time must do away once and for all with any pseudo-scientific illusion concerning concepts like ‘moral neutrality’. Just as the dissemination of knowledge is a moral duty of all scholars and researchers, in the same manner it is their obligation to assess the possible short-term and long-term effects of all discoveries and innovations. The decision concerning the methods, the conditions and limits of introduction of such novelties should be made according to these previous assessments, and not by purposefully circumventing or ignoring the foreseeable consequences. The ethicists of the relevant science should primarily carry out this evaluation and weighing.

Nonetheless, we obviously find ourselves in the situation that ethics are usually trudging behind the rapidly developing science, and therefore its cautious warnings are often characterized as ‘posterior wisdom’ (i.e. locking the stable-door after the horse has bolted).<sup>15</sup> It turns out again

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15. In the world of economics see e.g. Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., *Business Ethics: Roles and Responsibilities* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin Inc., 1994); Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do About It* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); George C. Lodge and Craig Wilson, *A*

and again that our ethical vision was not broad enough to envisage the approaching disaster.

Therefore, it could be claimed that while the average member of society followed the illusion of a sustainable development without any self-control or self-limitation and began to live more and more irresponsibly, there is a serious moral crisis which is responsible for both our economic and environmental problems. This moral crisis appears in different forms at the levels of middle class, scientists, politicians, and businessmen. It plays a key role everywhere in the irresponsible thirst for profit, in the individual prodigality and refusal to reassess one's true needs, and in the inhuman attitude which does not take into account the fate of others.

### ***A Possible Synergy between Theological Ethics and Sciences***

Theological ethics could not escape its own peculiar illusions either for a considerably long time. Systematic theologians did not indulge themselves as much in the myths of 'scientific neutrality' or 'sustainable development', but had to face the rather self-deceptive idea that theological ethics is the conscience of all other sciences. From this frequent starting point derived a certain heroic effort by which modern theologians strove to reflect ethically upon all those phenomena, which had been either neglected or merely touched upon by ethicists of other sciences. One of the obvious disadvantages of this process was the visibly increased unpopularity of theologians. See, for example, the not always unfounded assertions like "the theologians pretend to know it all". The theologians who are truly concerned about humankind and the world have to understand that our duty is not to work on the morals of science and society *instead* of other scientists, but rather *together with* them.

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*Corporate Solution to Global Poverty: How Multinationals Can Help the Poor and Invigorate Their Own Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Lynn S. Paine, *Cases in Leadership, Ethics, and Organizational Integrity: A Strategic Perspective* (Burr Ridge, IL: Richard D. Irwin, 1997); Sandra J. Sucher, *The Moral Leader: Challenges, Tools, and Insights* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

The fact that the contemporary crisis has a profoundly ethical origin wakes us all up from our various illusions. As a natural consequence of this, we have to assert that science and the scientist can never be neutral in a moral sense. This moral responsibility can not be devolved to others, or taken over from them. As ethicists of different sciences we are interdependent. The theologians of our age – regardless of how much they would love it – cannot propose to themselves to formulate the ethics of the oil industry, car manufacturing, genetic engineering, waste management, etc. It is nonetheless our common and scientific task to consolidate within our disciples and students all those behavioural patterns by which, at the behest of their own social, human and environmental morality, they themselves shall be able to formulate and follow these ethical rules as scientists, politicians or any other members of the society.

Further, the Christian theological anthropology is ignorant of a 'sustainable development' in the moral sense. Despite the fact that there had been attempts within theology, which sought to accomplish 'God's Kingdom' on earth by a gradual moral elevation of humankind, these ideas were always refuted not only by human history, but also by the very history of Christianity itself. This assertion does not necessarily mean that we agree with Max Weber's thesis concerning the spirit of capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the human being was not improved in a moral sense either by the universal and compulsory education, or by the rapidly developing sciences, technologies and the series of comfort-increasing services of modern civilization. As a theologian I must add with repentance: man was not bettered by the often self-emptied moralizing sermons either.

In an attempt to sum it up, we may assert that the moral vision of scientists, politicians and economists has often been far too narrow and far too simple to prevent the tragedies. This necessitates a more robust and complex moral vision for our globalized, and also very complex, world. It is also true that theology in itself is incapable of providing such a detailed moral vision. Therefore, it is time for the ethicists of various fields

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16. Max Weber, *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934).



(economists, scientists, political and health experts, physicists, theologians, etc.) to start working together by breaking the barriers of ‘scientific overspecialization’, which separate and even isolate us from each other. Thus, by a conscious determination to learn from each other, through a real and common effort, we may be able to formulate and provide a moral vision suitable indeed for our present and future. Theology could assist this project, *inter alia*, by its recurrent emphasis upon the perspective beyond the material world, evincing the inadequacy of the idea of a sustainable, yet merely material development.

Our work is not little, since we have to revive and refine within the whole of the society all those ethical sensibilities and mechanisms, which were largely corrupted by the dictatorship of artificial and exclusively market-oriented ‘needs’. Before the dangerously spreading moral neutrality deteriorates into moral indifference, the responsible specialists of various sciences ought to pinpoint by a serious collaboration all the problems underlying social phenomena, working conditions, production, education, healthcare, consumption, energy management and human relationships, and ought to formulate ethically valid responses to these. This in itself is already our inevitable, non-transferable and common scientific responsibility. As a theologian I would conclude with the very words by which Jesus challenges our moral commitment: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

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