INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN GENEVA,

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General topic: "The Green Reform: Ecotheology, Education and the Future of the Church"

Sub-topic: The ecological definition of the "neighbor": a contribution to the protection of creation.

Foreword

What follows is an excerpt from my doctoral dissertation, which was defended in April 2004 at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the Protestant University of Central Africa. It is entitled: ***The Protection of Creation: The Challenge of the World Council of Churches and Milestones for an Ecological Catechesis of the Evangelical Church of Congo***.

For the requirements of this conference, I have retained the sub-topic entitled **"The ecological definition of the "neighbor": a contribution to the protection of creation,"** in the hope that it will help – if only to a certain extent – both nourish and enrich our debates on the question of green reform.

It seems to me that the main task of this conference will be to engage in a deeper, scholarly exploration of a very recent topic – at least for us in the South, namely "The Green Reform". This topic highlights the inevitable paradox of the absolute need to "consume" in the process of development, as well as the paradox of the equally compelling need to "protect" life. All human life, or better, life itself keeps and sustains itself through the management of this paradox.

How can the ecological definition of the notion of the "neighbor" contribute to a responsible management of this paradox and to protecting creation?

The considerations that follow are arranged in the following manner:

I. The Ecological Definition of the Notion of the "Neighbor"

I.1. The "neighbor" in the Bible

I.2. The Incarnation: a practical affirmation of the ecological notion of the "neighbor"

II. The Preconditions for the Protection of Creation

II.1. An ecological ethics
II.2. An ethics of life
II.2.1. Life as God's plan
II.2.1.1. The concept of life
II.2.2. Life as a reality which must be respected
II.3. A human ethics
II.3.1. Promoting the notion of responsibility

Conclusion

The articulation of ecological and eschatological notions involves a recourse to new attitudes driven by the Holy Spirit and based on a new definition of relations between created beings. It substantiates an eschatological and ecological hope based on Jesus Christ in which the world awaits its renewal. It establishes a love based on hope in the new creation of all things, and consequently postulates an ecological definition of the notion of the "neighbor" as an indispensable prerequisite for the endeavor of protecting creation. What does it signify for the endeavor of ecological catechesis?

I. The Ecological Definition of the Notion of the "Neighbor"

I.1. The "neighbor" in the Bible

The Torah enjoins people to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18^{b}) and to love the foreigner residing in one's land *(Deut. 10:18-19; Lev. 19:33-34)*, who would later be understood as the proselyte. It also exhorts one to come to the aid of an Israelite's personal enemy (Ex. 23:3-4). However, it does not go further than this. Although Judaism at the time of Jesus and the apostles sometimes extended the scope of love, it never went so far as to include the opponents of the Jewish people. They remained enemies and could only be hated.

For Jesus, the neighbor does include such enemies. This is not a contradiction with the Old Testament since neither Jesus nor the apostles consciously replaced the law with something completely new, and although no Jewish ear could have heard "Love your enemies" without recalling Leviticus 19:18b, this should not be taken as a new precept which replaces the old. The scope of application is such that it eliminates the very notion of law, whose characteristic it is to determine and define. Instead of a norm, the commandment to "love your enemies" is a formula symbolizing the absence of any norm and the boundless extent of the domain of *agape*. Thus, when Jesus describes the goodness of God, which is bestowed equally on all persons whether good or bad, this demonstration loses its banality from the moment it is placed within the soteriological context of the New Testament. In their relations with their fellow humans, people cannot ignore "grace" (Mt. 18:23-36), through which God came to save sinful people "at home," as it were (Mk. 2:15-17, Lk. 19:5-10), and without them having fulfilled any preconditions. In this respect, Simon Legasse writes:

> Here, it is impossible to make distinctions, to establish *a priori* who is legitimately lovable and who is not. Those who adhere to the God of Jesus can only confess the caring universality of love. Everyone can, everyone must be loved: even the Romans, even Pilate, even Caesar.[1]

It is in this sense that one can understand the commandment to love God and neighbor. Those who love God necessarily make his plan for the world their own, and if this plan embraces all of humanity with the same saving love, it follows that the latter will be the object of love of those who love God. The main idea of Jesus' preaching is the Kingdom of God, "this immediate undertaking of God for the world, which has now become imminent through the word of its harbinger."[2]

Traditionally, Christian catechesis seems to define the neighbor only as "anyone who needs you,"[3] anyone who stands before you or, as Eric Fuchs says, "it is you who hear the commandment as you approach one who needs you."[4] Jules Marcel Nicole does not disagree with this, even when he exhorts one – in the following words – to extend the implications of the love for one's "neighbor":

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[1] LEGASSE, S., ***« Et qui est mon prochain ? »***, Cerf, Paris, 1989, p. 143. In order to answer the question, "who is my neighbor?", Simon Legasse posits the love of neighbor as the fundamental law of the Church before reflecting on its limits, presenting both its Old Testament origin and the radically New Testament accentuation of love for one's enemy.

[2] PERROT, Ch., ***Jésus et l'histoire***, Collection « Jésus et Jésus-Christ », N° 11, Desclée, Paris, 1979, p. 236.

[3] LEGASSE, S., ***Op. cit***., p. 147.

[4] FUCHS, E., ***L'Ethique protestante. Histoire et enjeux***, Les Bergers et les Mages/Labor et Fides, Paris/Genève, 1990, p. 103.

> Our love must extend far beyond, to our neighbors, to those we meet occasionally, including our enemies and persecutors. It is by going so far that we truly show that we are the sons of our heavenly Father, who is good toward the just and the unjust.[5]

This understanding seems somewhat restrictive since it seems to refer only to humans as the only points of convergence of love, its sole object. It does not make any reference to the rest of the universe, which, like humans, "has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Rom 8:22) and which therefore requires their kind attention. Since the universe is overwhelmed by the weight of sin and its consequences, it goes without saying that the plan of salvation initiated by God does not encompass humans alone. They must be taken as a paradigm, as those through whom salvation is called to spread to the rest of the created universe. Thus, the notion of the neighbor has a connotation or, better yet, a dimension that is much more extended and much broader, an ecological dimension. The person, created in the image and likeness of God, is no longer the only "neighbor," for everything that surrounds him is also his neighbor.

Eric Fuchs also seems to focus his attention on this restrictive meaning, which holds that we should only think of humans every time we think of the notion of the "neighbor". Fuchs writes:

> The imperative to recognize limits is in fact the imperative to recognize the other as one's limit. It is thus the acceptance of being with others and not against them, in order to form an alliance with them. The promise of life is inseparable from the acceptance of the imperative of recognizing others.[6]

The recognition of limits presupposes the recognition of the existence of others. In my opinion, however, this "other" cannot be reduced to man alone. Who is the other if not that which is other than him or other than the self? This "other-than-the-self" is that without which "I" am not. It can be a stone, hummingbird, water lily, baobab, herring, banana tree, coconut tree, ant, hornbill, man, woman, etc., depending on the situation. Perpetually in tension *with*, the "*I*" is determined in the fullness of humanity in its priestly and diaconal duties, in a universe where everything around oneself is intertwined. Human existence is determined and flourishes only in relation to this "other-than-the-self", in relation to the "neighbor". Why should not the parrot and the tomato be the "neighbors" of humans, just like the sovereign's wife, the mason's daughter, the village fisherman or the neighbor's son or daughter? From an earthly perspective, the neighbor can be defined as what is close to us, within reach or view, creation. Jesus seems to

5 NICOLE, J.-M., ***Précis de Doctrine Chrétienne***, Institut Biblique de Nogent, Nogent-sur-Marne, 1998, p. 221.
6 ***Ibid.***, p. 104.

insinuate this in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37, Mt. 22:34-40), who became the neighbor of the fallen victim. In this respect, Olivier Abel notes:

> Moreover, here we have the best-constructed ethical category for the nearby and far-away victims of ecological challenges, because in this story the victim is not "specified" and could perhaps be anyone (*I would add "anything"*), in all his universality. Instead, he is shown as being there, in his suffering corporeality and singularity.[7]

The absence of a specification of the victim is a gap which is open to any adaptation. The anonymity of the victim may have paradigmatic value. This calls for an ecological definition of the notion of the neighbor which – if even to a small extent – joins in with the aspirations of Saint Francis of Assisi, who "saw in other creatures his fellow people: the earth as his mother, the animals, birds and plants as his brothers and sisters."[8] Refusing the attribute of man's "neighbor" to the created universe sanctions regrettable attitudes and behavior in relations between beings and things. The same can be said of attempts to restrict or limit this notion to humans.

In my humble opinion, Christ's incarnation seems to be the key that may help decode the ecological conception of the notion of the "neighbor."

I.2. The Incarnation: a practical affirmation of the ecological notion of the "neighbor"

As a catechetical articulation, the ecological definition of the notion of the "neighbor" refers to the incarnation of Jesus, the key that helps us understand, decode and substantiate this notion theologically. The act of incarnation decodes and illuminates the paradox of the "Creator who became a creature for the salvation of creation."[9]

Indeed, if the salvation of man has been made possible through the incarnation of God the Son, that of the entire universe happens through the humbling of man. The incarnation of God the Son means that Jesus Christ accepted the pattern of life encompassing birth, growth, human existence, suffering and death. What concrete significance does this have? By affirming the incarnation, the Church proclaims that

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7 Olivier, Abel, « Le défi de l'homme à la nature », in *Les Protestants face aux défis du XXIè siècle, Actes du colloque du 50è anniversaire du journal « Réforme »,* Labor et Fides, Genève, 1995, p. 112.

8 NJOUENWET KOP, B.*, **L'Eglise face au problème de l'écologie : une étude éthique pour la sauvegarde de la création,*** Master's thesis, F.T.P., Yaoundé, 1996, p. 37.

9 NSOUAMI, P.*, **L'Eglise Evangélique du Congo et l'herméneutique de la sauvegarde de l'environnement***, Master's thesis in theology, Protestant Theological Faculty of Yaoundé, Yaoundé, 1998, p. 59.

the infinitely great has become infinitely small; that the Creator has become a "creature" in order to save creation; that Jesus Christ recapitulates in his body all of creation which, from now on, can attain the salvation which God bestows. The incarnation means that God, in Jesus Christ, became Man in order to save man; that he voluntarily humiliated himself, to the point of identifying himself as a "creature" in order to save creation. If the incarnation is the price paid by the Lord God for the salvation of the world, what good would the refusal to accord the status of "neighbor" to the rest of the universe do for man? The incarnation also means that man has henceforth been accredited to God, of whom he has become "the Other." Thus man, the "Other-of-God,"[10] becomes the paradigm of the salvation of the universe, the one whom the Creator cares for down to the smallest detail, the one through whom salvation passes in order to spread to the rest of the universe. If Christ recapitulates the world in himself, in the incarnation, he bears man and, by extension, the world.

At the risk of repeating myself, I affirm with Kä Mana:

> For God, the principle of incarnation consisted of taking on human destiny to the fullest, sharing the reality of man, profoundly and integrally, so that nothing pertaining to the human condition might be unfamiliar to him. Not only did his word become flesh, but it became us, the body of our own body, the flesh of our flesh, the breath of our breath, the word of our own word, the human Face of this God who loves us.[11]

The incarnation recapitulates the entire created universe in the body of Jesus of Nazareth, sanctifies it and opens up its destiny. The incarnation has a highly sacrificial value both for man, created in the image of God, and for the entire universe. The idea of recognizing the "neighbor" in the created does not suggest a conformation of the human to the bestial, to "vegetality"; still less does it signify its equality with the created, but rather the recognition of all creation as co-creatures, one's neighbors, one's "fellow beings".[12] It is by no means a confusion that might substantiate the belief in metempsychosis or reincarnation. In other words, the legitimization of the ecological definition of the "neighbor" is not based on any supposed respect toward plants, beasts, rivers or any creatures in which one might see a person who died earlier and has returned to life in another form. Far from it! It is nothing less than the recognition of the created

10 KANGUDI Kabwatila, « Inculturation et libération en théologie africaine », in ***Théologie africaine. Bilan et perspectives, Actes de la Dix-septième Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa, 2-8 avril 1989***, Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 1989, p. 206.

11 KÄ MANA, ***Christ d'Afrique. Enjeux éthiques de la foi africaine en Jésus-Christ***, KARTHALA, CETA, CLE, HAHO, Paris, Nairobi, Yaoundé, Lomé, 1994, p. 216.

12 This is the term used by Saint Francis of Assisi. Cf. GOBRY, Iv., ***S[t] François d'Assise et l'esprit franciscain,*** Ed. du Seuil, Paris, 1957, pp. 76-79.

status and the acceptance of the consequences this entails. This exercise is a true act of love, a true kenosis.

Every saving act devoid of true love indeed rests on fragile foundations. Love implies a sacrifice, mourning, annihilation of the self, death to oneself for the sake of the happiness of others. The sacrifice inherent in this approach implies a fresh view of the tomato, the swallow, the river, the mango tree, the termite and other biotic or abiotic entities, their acceptance into the circle of co-creatures, for the ultimate aim of preserving their species and in eschatological hope. It is about reading the glory of God in creation itself and asking ourselves about our responsibility toward it. Such a reading implies that our renewed relationship with nature obliges us to recognize that our lives are in solidarity with other lives. Schweitzer, the doctor of Lambaréné, declared in this connection:

> This deepened notion of life does not allow us to limit ourselves to solidarity with our species, but demands that we extend it to all life in which we can recognize a resemblance to that which is in us to some degree.[13]

The extension of human solidarity to all life seems to be the main idea underpinning Schweitzer's thought. This understanding can be decoded through the way in which Moltmann seems to highlight the interlocking and interdependent nature of the components of life when he writes:

> …Nothing in the world exists, lives and moves by itself. Everything exists, lives and moves in the other, one in the other, one for the other, in the cosmic structures of the divine Spirit. Thus, only the community of creation in the Spirit itself can be called "fundamental".[14]

Moltmann insists that there is a certain interdependence of the constituent elements of creation. This community of creation and destiny is one of the reasons for recognizing in the other not an ordinary work of God but rather a co-creature, our "*neighbor*". However, this community of creation, which has its origin in the Spirit, can be conceptualized only by reference to a destiny oriented toward the eternal kingdom. He therefore affirms:

[13] SCHWEITZER, A. quoted by JOY, C. R., ***Albert Schweitzer. Une anthologie***, Payot, Paris, 1950, p. 47.
[14] MOLTMANN, J., ***Dieu dans la création***, Les Editions, du Cerf, Paris, 1988, p. 25.

> Everything that happens from God has this orientation which directs us from the original creation to the eternal kingdom. For God does not create the world for corruption and death, but for his glory and thus for eternal life.[15]

In its ecological meaning, the notion of "neighbor" grounds an ethics of ties among creation and exceeds the human limits which seem to be ascribed to it, as David Bosch writes:

> In a world where people are interdependent and where everyone exists in a network of inter-human relations, it is absolutely indefensible to limit salvation to the individual and his personal relationship with God. Hatred, injustice, oppression, war and other forms of violence are manifestations of evil; caring for people, the desire to overcome famine, disease and the loss of meaning, are part of the salvation we hope and work for.[16]

Bosch's discourse seems to be concerned only with interpersonal relationships characterized by the plural expression of counter-values. He, too, seems to ignore the relationship of man to nature.

II. From the Contribution of the Ecological Definition of the "Neighbor" to Protecting Creation

In this universe where the ecological question innovates relationships, where the notion of the neighbor extends to all creation to the point that "each person is the neighbor of the other", establishing an ecological ethics is a compelling necessity.

II.1. An ecological ethics

Strictly speaking, ethics deals with what is right and just; it is more than morality, custom or civic probity. In other words, it deals with limited imperatives as distinguished from unlimited imperatives, which are expressed in morality, custom and law. The ethical question is, in itself, a call to search for "what is good and just, here and now,"[17] in a non-conformist way and outside established customs and current laws.

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[15] ***Ibid***., p. 167.
[16] BOSCH, D., ***Dynamique de la mission chrétienne. Histoire et avenir des modèles missionnaires***, Karthala and others, Paris, 1995, p. 480.
[17] ***Ibid.***

From an ecological perspective, the task of ethics is to outline our responsibilities toward the environment.

Otto Schäeffer-Guignier asks the question of whether nature is a counterpart to which we would be directly responsible. Is there a duty to respect nature regardless of its importance to humans? To answer this question, he refers to an attempt to systematize the answers proposed by the German philosopher Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich in eight concentric circles representing eight forms of direct responsibility in ethics:[18]

1. *Everyone is responsible only to himself;*

2. *Everyone is responsible to himself, his family, friends and acquaintances, as well as to his direct ancestors;*

3. *Everyone is responsible to himself, his friends, family and fellow citizens, to the people he belongs to, including the immediate heritage of the past (ethnocentric ethics);*

4. *Everyone is responsible to himself, his friends and family and his people, as well as to all the generations currently alive of all mankind;*

5. *Everyone is responsible to himself, his friends and family, his people, humanity today and all ancestors and descendants, and therefore to all of humanity (anthropocentric ethics);*

6. *Everyone is responsible to all of humanity and all sentient beings (individuals and species, psychocentric ethics);*

7. *Everyone is responsible to everything that lives (individuals and species, biocentric ethics);*

8. *Everyone is responsible to everything (holocentric ethics).*

We notice that the more these duties are extended beyond human beings, the less feasible they will be. How can one attempt to respect everyone he encounters without permanently experiencing pangs of

[18] Cf. SCHÄEFFER-GUIGNIER, O., « Le concept de nature en Ethique de l'Environnement », in ***Ethique et Nature***, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1992, pp. 123-148.

conscience? If left unaltered, Meyer-Abich's approach will very likely lead to the conclusion that it is a mistake to exist.

Between this kind of pragmatism and a questionable foundation of the rights of nature on an ontological level, the proposed path is that of sharing - in debate - convictions of the type of questioning normativity engendered by the encounter of natural phenomena in their diversity. A critical revision of Schweitzer's ethics, whose detailed debate with the Western philosophical heritage is seldom noticed, would seem to be of great interest for this research.

Whether ecological ethics leans toward biocentrism or anthropocentrism, the ideal is to reflect on "what is right and just, here and now," and what fully satisfies the triple relationship of verticality, horizontality, and alterity which implies our existence.

Ecological ethics would certainly help us address the challenge of Christian responsibility, a topic dear to the reformer Jean Calvin.[19]

However, ethical-ecological reflection should not obscure the spectrum of African values, which views man as the vital center of the human condition, relationship or communion as its cornerstone, life as its supreme value, and solidarity as its umbilical cord.[20] This presupposes an ethics of life.

II.2. An ethics of life

Today, the ecological conception of the nature of humanity and God has developed as a reaction, firstly in view of the ecological crisis; secondly, against the inability of the disconnected view of humanity and nature to show the way toward an ecologically sustainable and just society; and, thirdly, against the inability of the scientific and technological conception of the world to account for what is most important in existence.[21] Birch believes that "the ecological model of nature, humanity and God implies an ethics that encompasses the entire world of values, and particularly the value of life."[22] Western ethics is fundamentally anthropocentric because its scale of values is based on man. Everything exists for our benefit. The ecological crisis highlights the impoverishing character of this ethics. According to Birch, nature appears under four aspects:

1. *"The conception of '**nature as a laboratory**', which is that of scientists who wish to study kangaroos and elephants in the wild;*

[19] FUCHS, E., ***Op. cit.***, p. 44.
[20] Infra, p. 289.
[21] BIRCH, C., " Une éthique de la vie dans une perspective écologique ", *in* ***Science sans conscience. Foi, science et avenir de l'homme***, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1980, pp. 44-45.
[22] ***Ibid.***

2. *The conception of '**nature as a gymnasium**', a place for relaxation and sporting activities;*

3. *The conception of '**nature as a cathedral'**, a source of aesthetic pleasure and spiritual renewal;*

4. *The conception of '**nature as a warehouse**', where we find food, clothing and other products we need."*

These four aspects under which nature appears reflect the true status of nature in the eyes of man. This undoubtedly falls within the utilitarian conception of nature, which sanctions a "purely instrumental" ethics of nature conservation. But it is necessary to recognize that the value plants and animals have is only that which they have in our eyes, which they have both "in themselves, for themselves" and "for God". Our ability to feel and experience sensations can alone confer value on all created beings, which is only possible in an ecological universe and never in a universe of mechanisms. Everything that has intrinsic value has a right to exist and prosper. "Here we find," says Birch, "a solid foundation for an ethics of life that encompasses it in its totality."[23]

However, I believe that Birch's anthropocentrism can only become humane if it is coupled with the consciousness of "received life", which Fuchs mentions when speaking about the consciousness of dependence and interdependence: "*To be alive is to receive life, never to possess it.*"[24] The dependence of created beings on God, and interdependence among each other in a relationship of reciprocity and alterity, is the soil that enriches the person and makes him blossom and mature. Awareness of "received life" inevitably leads us to reflect upon the meaning of the concept of life.

II.2.1. Life as God's plan

II.2.1.1. The concept of life

Le Robert defines life as "the duration of existence of an individual or the power thought to be governing all the events of existence".[25]

According to the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Bible*, life is manifested firstly by movement. Thus, in the Bible, the adjective "living" refers above all to men and animals who move voluntarily, and

[23] BIRCH, C*., **Op. cit.***, p. 45.
[24] ***Ibid.***
[25] Le Robert, ***Dictionnaire alphabétique de la langue française***, Le Robert, Paris, 1981, p. 805.

even to water (Gen. 26:19, Lev. 14:5ff) and trees (Job 14:7, Is. 11:1). Soon thereafter, however, breathing or the “breath” would become the outward sign of animated life: to cease breathing is to die (Job 17:1).[26]

The translations of the New Testament render three words from the Greek language with the word "life":

1. ζωη refers to the life that is in man – active, conscious, moral and spiritual, and applies especially to the idea of eternal life;[27]

2. ψυχη denotes life and the soul (Mt.16:26) so that the two notions merge and overlap, as is the case in certain passages of the Old Testament;[28]

3. βιος, used most often, is best translated as "existence" and designates earthly, material, and the present life.[29]

The three understandings of life integrate our reflection in that they all imply the idea of value and meaning, both from the perspectives of content and duration. The African experience, however, does not limit life to breathing. In this particular context, everything is life. This is why the notion of being entails that of strength. This is because, as Placide Tempels writes, "being is that which is strength".[30] Obviously, in view of the complexity of the idea implied here, "no science can tell us what life is.”[31]

II.2.2. Life as a reality which must be respected

It seems necessary to introduce my considerations on the respect for life by referring to the understanding of Albert Schweitzer, for whom life is a matter of "*affirmation and negation*".[32] By the "affirmation of life and the world", he means:

[26] Collective authorship, ***Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Bible***, volume 1, Ed. A. Westphal, Imprimeries réunies, Valence-sur-Rhone, 1935.
[27] CARREZ, M. and MOREL, F., ***Dictionnaire Grec-Français du Nouveau Testament***, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1988 ; Cf. D. MOUNCE, W., ***The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament***, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993.
[28] ***Ibid.***
[29] ***Ibid.***
[30] TEMPELS, P. (R.P.), ***La Philosophie Bantoue***, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1949, pp. 35-36.
[31] SCHWEITZER, A., ***Kultur und Ethik. Kulturphilosophie***, Zweiter Teil, 1923, p. 238.
[32] JOY, C. R., ***Albert SCHWEITZER. Une anthologie***, Payot, Paris, 1950, p. 31.

> The attitude of the person who says “yes" to life and the world, of the person who, considering life as he is aware of it in his own being and as he perceives it in the universe, views it as a value in itself and therefore strives to maintain it, bring it to perfection and ensure its full development.[33]

By the “negation of life and the world”, Schweitzer has in mind:

> The attitude of the person who, considering life as he is aware of it in his own being and as he perceives it in the universe, views it as meaningless and full of sorrow, and who is consequently led to annihilate the will to life that is in him and renounce all activity which aims at creating better living conditions for himself and other beings.[34]

For Schweitzer, all life is valuable as a manifestation of the absolute Value – God, who is intuitively grasped in mystical experience. Life is the reality of being and wanting to be; thus, the world is nothing else than a tragic conflict of values that can only find a partial but necessary solution in this age through the advent of the respect for life.

According to him, life is a good received from elsewhere, as Eric Fuchs affirmed later on. The fullness of its meaning and price can only be found in its origin. According to Schweitzer, this received life fills nature:

> The deeper our gaze penetrates into nature, the more we recognize that it is full of life and the more we notice that all life is a mystery, and that we are united to all life that is in nature. Man can no longer live life for himself alone. We realize that all life has value and that we are united to all this life. This recognition gives birth to our spiritual relationship with the universe.[35]

For Schweitzer, respect for life is unimaginable without an ultimate reference to a spiritual relationship with the universe. Such a relationship can only originate in the Creator of all things visible and invisible. Indeed, this reference to God makes the notion of received life visible and legible.

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[33] ***Ibid.,*** p. 33.
[34] ***Ibid***.
[35] ***Ibid***., p. 39.

Schweitzer sharply criticizes Rene Descartes, whose philosophical point of departure was: "I think, therefore I am,"[36] a proposition that the former believed leads "irreparably to the path of abstraction." Schweitzer also postulates "the most immediate fact of human thought," which he formulates as follows: "**I am life that wants to live, among life that wants to live.**"[37] Schweitzer rationally substantiates respect for life in the same way that Descartes rationally justifies the certainty of his own existence. However, while Descartes loses himself in abstraction, Schweitzer remains concrete.

Henry Babel describes how he implemented this principle of respect for life in the following anecdote, reported by a person who once had a meal with him:

> While a little beetle was walking on the tablecloth, I carefully tried to remove it. A firm hand leaned on my arm: "No, don't do it: how do you know if you won't break its leg? Several days ago, I was having lunch with a bishop. An ant was on my jacket and, like you, the bishop wanted to get rid of it. I protested: 'Monseigneur, you were taught many things so that you could become a bishop, but you have not been taught how to remove an ant without breaking its legs. Besides, this ant is mine, it is on my jacket. Let it be'" (*Journal de Genève*, 3 January 1952).[38]

This anecdote reflects Schweitzer's compassion for "all living beings", for which "he interceded in the evening, in his prayers".[39]

However, the basis for ethics which compassion provides is too narrow. Respect for life appeals to the sense of unity among living beings, of communion in both times of joy and suffering. Ethics leaves out any consideration of success or failure, and is not concerned with the intrinsic value of its subject. The drama of the world in which the will to life, divided against itself, is manifested as both a destructive and creative force, is an unsolvable enigma. Indeed, respecting life means respecting my life just like that of others. Albert Schweitzer writes:

> The affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man stops letting himself live and begins to devote himself with respect to his own life, in order to give it its true value.

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[36] DESCARTES, R., ***Discours de la méthode***, Le Livre de poche, Librairie Générale Française, Paris, 1973, p. 129; Cf. Collectif, ***Les Philosophes par les textes, De Platon à Sartre***, Nathan, Paris, 1989, pp. 67-71.

[37] SCHWEITZER, A., ***Ma Vie et ma pensée***, Albin Michel, Paris, 1960, p. 172.

[38] SCHWEITZER, A., quoted by BABEL, H., ***La Pensée d'Albert SCHWEITZER***, Ed. H. Messeiler, Neuchâtel, n.d., p. 114.

[39] ***Ibid***., p. 16.

> To affirm life is to make one's will to live more profound and internalized, and to exalt it.

His conception of life, on which his attitude toward it is based, by and large agrees with African thought, which regards life as "the value *par excellence* that should be protected and promoted at all costs".[40] In this connection, Waswandi Kakule writes:

> Life is a value which is highly prized by the Bantu, for example: from conception to the afterlife. That is why the Bantu celebrate the stages of life with pomp and circumstance: pregnancy, birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, the pact of adult friendship or the blood pact, death, and the mystery of the afterlife through the cult of ancestors.[41]

Mulago, Mbiti, Mveng and many others therefore take it for granted that all Bantu morality revolves around a fundamental notion - life, with which the universe, God, man and society must commune. Waswandi adds to this by quoting Tshiamalenga Ntumba, who writes:

> Life is the supreme good. It is the subject of the most basic and common wish among the Bantu: "Moyo au!" – "May life be with you!" "Moyo webe au!" – "May your life be with you!" It has its source in God. . .[42]

Indeed, in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is man who is defined solely as "the most precious capital,"[43] "the privileged being *par excellence*, both the center and the goal of creation."[44] According to this understanding, it is difficult to think of extending the notion of the value of life beyond man. With regard to the different African cosmogonies, Louis-Vincent Thomas and René Luneau note:

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[40] According to our Vili informants from Congo, in this case Mr. Sylvain Makosso-Makosso, former minister of primary and secondary education of the Republic of Congo, former rector of the Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville and currently professor of history at the same university. Interview conducted in Pointe-Noire in October 1999.

[41] WASWANDI Kakule, « Ethique africaine et morale chrétienne ou inculturation de l'éthique chrétienne », in ***Théologie africaine, Bilan et perspectives. Actes de la Dix-septième Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa, 2-8 avril 1989***, Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 1989, p. 288.

[42] TSHIAMALENGA, N. quoted by WASWANDI Kakule, in WASWANDI Kakule, ***Op. cit.***, p. 288. Cf. TSHIAMALENGA, N., « La vision Ntu de l'homme. Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique », in ***Cahiers des Religions Africaines***, vol. 7, 14 , 1973, p. 183.

[43] THOMAS, L.-V. et LUNEAU, R., ***Op. cit.***, p. 37.

[44] ***Ibid.***, p. 267.

> Not only does the cosmos often take human form. Man also occupies the center of the universe, and it is for man that God created the fields, the rivers, the animals and the genies that serve as intermediaries between the Creator and his creatures. Man thus appears as the fundamental value, as the prime value around which all problems revolve.[45]

In Africa, the value of life is determined through the prism of man as the center of the cosmos. This idea is reinforced by Fabien Kangue Ewane, who, in addition to considering man the center of the cosmos, views life as an interferential phenomenon. Thus, he writes:

> All life must be conceived as an interweaving of circles with a principle on the inside which some have called Yahweh, Yehowah, God, and others, Africans, have called "Si", "Hilolume", "Nji Nji", etc. Names which give it its dynamism, vitality, in accordance with all the elements of nature. The logical consequence is that we cannot look at a tree, mountain or water differently. These natural elements are all permeated with a life that directly interferes in the life of man. For example, inside trees there is a life that is in communion with man.[46]

Kangue Ewane echoes the notion of dynamic or vitalist ontology, which Placid Tempels alluded to during his lifetime in his book *Bantu Philosophy*.[47]

The respect for life advocated by Schweitzer requires some commentary. Indeed, the option of protecting all life entails – when practiced – complete abstinence from consuming all things. It is at odds with the Old Testament, in which the Creator allows man to feed on "every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. . .” (Gen. 1: 29ff). What follows immediately after this quote describes the cycle of consumption established for the preservation of life, through the reasonable destruction of life. The text states in particular:

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[45] ***Ibid***., p. 37.

[46] KANGUE EWANE, F., « L’incontournable retour aux sources », in ***Ecovox Dossier*** N° 9, Juillet-Septembre 1996, p.13.

[47] Cf. TEMPELS, P. (R.P.), ***La Philosophie Bantoue***, Présence africaine, Paris, 1949, pp. 35-36. In this book he distinguishes between two ontologies: one that is dynamic (African ontology, based on the senses), and another that is static (Western ontology, based on Cartesianism). TEMPELS indeed holds that "strength is inseparably linked to being, which is why these two notions remain linked in their definition of being." Thus, "for the Bantu, being is that which is strength."

> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food (Gen. 1:30).

Moreover, the Evangelist John relates a post-Easter episode in which the Lord Jesus, whom we consider the key for understanding life, surrounds himself with some of his disciples with whom he shares (eats) freshly-caught fish (Jn 21:1-14).

In view of the above, I affirm the absolute necessity of "consumption" in the process of protecting life. All life is preserved and sustained through the management of this paradox.

The perspective that Albert Schweitzer envisions is, in my opinion, of a mystical nature and cannot be applied to the biological or material plane. This is because, as André Beauchamp noted:

> It is not possible to live biologically without consuming energy and, in the case of our species, without eating or polluting in some way. Zero pollution, zero consumption and zero modification of the environment are an impossible ideal.[48]

Albert Schweitzer's thought is a mixture of theological and philosophical ethics. Speaking of Schweitzer's thought, Otto Schäeffer-Guignier writes:

> The ethics of respect for life is at the same time interpreted as a concretion of the philosophical ideal of humanity and as a universalist broadening of the religious ideal of love for one's neighbor.[49]

In other words, the ethics of respect for life justifies the humanity of humans and substantiates their difference from the bestial by reference to their religious aspect.

In a certain sense, Schweitzer's opinion seems to be relatively close to the African mentality and adapted to it in light of the importance he attaches to life, understood as an absolute value. He establishes a hierarchy of values since, for him, an attack on life is permissible only to the extent that it is necessary for the promotion of higher values such as justice, fraternity, peace. His life is worth more than that of the wild beast ready to devour him since it is necessary for other lives which are counting on it in order to

[48] BEAUCHAMP, A., ***Pour une sagesse de l'environnement***, Novalis, Ottawa, 1991, p. 91.
[49] SCHÄEFFER-GUIGNIER, O., ***Op. cit.***, pp. 14-15.

grow. God is the absolute value. This position brings us closer to Le Senne, whom Henry Babel quoted in the following words:

> Every value (intellectual, artistic, religious) is an expression of the Value, moral value itself. It manifests the absolute Value by being willing, in this case, to make itself the will of the divine Spirit, the source and model of all freedom actualizing value.[50]

For Le Senne, a value has value only when it is justified by its reference to the absolute Value, the source of all things. Gusdorf, however, criticizes this position, believing that it "disqualifies everything in the activity of people that does not refer to divine transcendence" and that it "condemns human destiny to heteronomy."[51]

The history of humanity, however, blatantly contradicts Schweitzer's thought on the respect for life. From the slave trade to the barbarous exploitation of natural resources in the world in general, and in Africa in particular, to the two world wars and the Rwandan genocide, everything suggests that man advocates the affirmation of life through paradoxical acts which deny its relevance and belie their sincerity outright. His character traits bring him closer to/reconcile him with the inclination to decide over life, a tendency opposed by the World Council of Churches in its "**Theology of Life**" program. Speaking of the latter, in his intimate relationship with the new evangelization, Kä Mana declared:

> It conveys the conviction that what is being discussed in the new evangelization is life as such. It is this that is being threatened. It is this that has been destroyed. It is this that imposes new duties on us in view of the environment, the economy, politics, the social crisis, moral demands and moral imperatives: duties to sow Christ as the energy for transforming these fields of existence, which must become true places of fulfillment for the person and society. Living according to the Christian utopia thus becomes an essential axis of missionary efforts: to work so that the promise of life in abundance in Christ is not a vain word or a vain illusion.[52]

From this standpoint, the promotion and fulfillment of life are seen as requirements and imperatives that call for a new perspective, fertilized and driven by a solid anchoring of society in Christ.

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[50] LE SENNE, R. quoted by Henry BABEL, ***La Pensée d'Albert SCHWEITZER***, Ed. H. MESSEILLER, Neuchâtel, n.d., p. 210.
[51] GUSDORF, G., ***Traité de l'Existence morale***, Paris, 1949, pp. 104-105 ; Cf. BABEL, H., ***Op. cit.***, p. 210.
[52] KÄ MANA (2000), ***Op. cit***., p. 161.

However, life is conceived as a value that is subordinate to the absolute Value, in which it originates. It is one, plural, polysemic and polymorphic. Its origin alone should justify why it must be respected. Despite the attitude of Westerners toward life, the notion of respect for life has the advantage of awakening our consciousness of all the biotic and abiotic constituents which populate our universe of existence. Life must be promoted and protected.

In this nature wholly permeated with life, an ethics of the humane should be polished, refined and asserted.

II.3. A human ethics

Eric Fuchs holds that, for Scripture, the person is a person only if he recognizes three things:

1. The first is that of the "precedence" of the creative Word of God. Here arises the problem of its origin, with a double indication: that of the "desire of Another to want it alive", and that of the inaccessibility of the "place of origin that does not belong to it". Thus, man cannot access the person without trusting the promise based on his existence. If the first indication is the consequence of the priority of the promise, the second prevents any imaginary identification with the Origin. Man is "in the image of God", that is, in the image of the One of whom it is simply impossible, and forbidden, to make an image. Thus, the truth of every man is one of the Word, and not of representation. The Word of "the Other" establishes me as a living being.

2. The second recognition is that of "*interdependence*". It is this that indicates, in its symbolic dimension, the fact that the human being should be gendered. Man is not alone, and he is not everything. If the Bible postulates that the human being is created man and woman from the outset (Genesis 1:27), this is in order to underscore its two joint realities: man is always co-humanity, and as such he is always confronted with the question of his limits.

"To think of interdependence based on gendered existence is to understand that it is both a relation of similarity and difference."[53] To be a man in the presence of a woman is indeed to recognize that a relationship and mutual desire are possible only because there is at the same time a shared belonging to the human race and a specific way of living this belonging.

The recognition of interdependence also substantiates both the equality of rights and the right to be recognized in one's specificity, in one's difference. "The Other is forever the partner, the other myself

[53] BIRCH, C**.,** ***Op. cit.***, p. 45.

and the one who is other than myself, who teaches me reciprocity and alterity."[54] It is through the weaving of these bonds between similarity and difference, reciprocity and alterity, that the human community is built, under the various forms of the family, the state, professions, and so on.

3. The third recognition that conditions human fulfillment is that of "*responsibility*". The person who is sparked by the Word, challenged by the word of others, must take responsibility for his answer, answer "to" and answer "from". What characterizes man is his ability to respond, to be responsible. By consenting to this, he constitutes himself as a being whose vocation is to answer the question of the truth, which he is always asked as soon as he agrees to enter into a relationship with others. Thus, man exists when he consents to recognize that which his situation of precedence, interdependence and responsibility necessarily implies – in other words, when he lets himself be claimed by the Other.[55]

Eric Fuchs' theory reinforces the ancient African experience of life underpinned by verticality (*precedence*), horizontality (*interdependence*) and alterity (*responsibility*). The wisdom of the Kongo summarizes the three recognitions in the following proverb: "Bole Bantu, bukaka nsongo", which means: "*People are two, loneliness is the worst of evils*." The following proverb of the Vili says no less about them: "*Mu-tu lumonio lufoti*" – "*The human being is a liana*" (he resembles his fellow beings in the way that a liana is entangled with all plants).[56] It indicates the idea of sociability, communion, community, and human complementarity that controls mutual tension.

To summarize, man exists only when he recognizes that he is preceded by God. Man is inspired in his truth by a word which comes to him. Therefore, in Christian theology, man is important because he is the expression of a will that precedes him, and this is why it (Christian theology) is opposed to destiny and determinism. Human existence is theologically positive because man is neither at its origin nor is its origin. He is the image of this Other.

As for this man who is reaching out towards the other, how does he exercise his vocation to answer "to" and "from", from the concrete perspective of "ecological *diakonia*"?

II.3.1. Promoting the notion of responsibility

What is responsibility, and how is it expressed in the field of ecology? Eric Fuchs believes that the classical model of the Reformation, the key to the ethical interpretation of Scripture, is comprised of three elements that form a system:

[54] ***Ibid.***, p. 107.
[55] FUCHS, E., ***Op. cit.***, p. 107.
[56] HAGENBUCHER-SACRIPANTI, F., ***Op. cit.***, p. 51.

> . . .a certain understanding of man (anthropology), a strong valorization of the Law (nomology) and a focus on the figure of Christ as an ethical paradigm (Christology).[57]

Here we find summarized three essential propositions (which Eric Fuchs likes to call “recognitions”) which were alluded to above: precedence, interdependence and responsibility. Man is a created being. He moves in a universe that preceded and formed him, a universe that leads him to “turn toward”. Hence his interdependence, which places him in a constant tension to respond to others. The entire human experience is played out in the management of "the confrontation with the limits that can either lead to rejection and violence, or to an opening up to the dimension of alterity”.[58]

Ethics as personal responsibility is about taking corporeal reality into account: it is responsibility toward oneself. The body must be kept alive and in good health; it has rights that must be protected. Because of this, in the middle of the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke out against the conception of a certain kind of Protestantism which tended to neglect the body:

> The bodily life that we receive – without having done anything for it – has the right to preservation. . .Because rights cease with life, the preservation of bodily life is the basis of all natural rights and is therefore of particular importance. Body life is a good in itself.[59]

It expresses itself in the joys of the body: the home, food, clothing, rest, games and sexuality, which are the foretaste of the eternal joy (Eccl. 2:24; 3:12; 9:7). The legitimate desire to satisfy oneself with the joys of the body should be driven by the exercise of the sense of responsibility. Indeed, called to answer *to* and *from*, man is responsible for his actions.

Theologically, the Sartrean man – i.e., he who is the product of what he wants to be or become, the man who does what he wants to do – does not exist. Man is a gift and a project based on the omnipotence of another. In his quest for the effective assumption of his responsibility, he must have a clear idea of the notions of *orthopraxis* and *orthodoxy*. Orthopraxis – right experience or practice, aims at restoring dignity to the human being and denouncing all undertakings that degrade man and reduce his spheres of expression and his rights. It is action that is taken with a constant verification of its conformity

[57] FUCHS, E., « Actualité de l’Ethique protestante », in ***Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses***, vol. 68, 1993/2, Montpellier, 1993, p. 205.
[58] ***Ibid***., p. 206.
[59] BONOEFFER, D., ***Ethique***, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1965, pp. 124-125.

to the original intent. It is meant to be reflective and therefore subject to evaluation. Orthopraxis is driven by the concern for efficacy in view of change and transformation.

It pertains to the ethics of responsibility, which is opposed to the ethics of conviction, which is a dogmatism that is blind, rigid, categorical and quick to condemn. It aims at embodying orthodoxy, right opinion, right doctrine.[60] It refers to "an ethical anthropocentrism, an anthropocentrism of responsibility, where humanity is at the center only insofar as it accepts its responsibility.[61]

CONCLUSION

Managing the paradox of the "**absolute necessity to consume**" and that of the "**absolute necessity to develop**" implies new attitudes and behaviors of the person with regard to creation. The predominant view substantiates the thesis of extending the notion of "neighbor" to all creation. It presupposes and prescribes a real conversion of men and women to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in order to assume their humanity responsibly. This is the price that must be paid for reasonable development which takes into account the utopia of protecting of creation.

All of this presupposes the requirement and the fulfillment of the prerequisites for the protection of creation, which are:

- An ecological ethics;
- An ethics of life;
- Life as God's plan;
- Life as a reality which must be respected;
- A human ethics;
- Promoting the notion of responsibility

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[60] Cf. ZOE-OBIANGA, J.-S., " Le Cercle herméneutique ", in ***Séminaire de Méthodologie, 2e Année de D.E.T.A***., F.T.P., Yaoundé, 2001.

[61] ABEL, O., « Le défi de l'homme à la nature », Dialogue entre Olivier Abel et Jacques Friedel, in ***Les Protestants face au XXIè s., Actes du Colloque du 50ème anniversaire du Journal « Réforme »***, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1995, p. 112.

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