INTERRELIGIOUS OPEN THEOLOGY AND HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM: In Conversation with Catherine Keller

PD Dr. JOHANNES GRÖSSL, Universität Würzburg.

Comparative theology always starts with the awareness that one's own religion has a *weakness*. One important weakness of Christianity, as stressed by Catherine Keller, is human exceptionalism. That God has created humans in God's own image is a core doctrine in Christianity, with important advantages, especially when it comes to the foundation of human rights and when establishing a model of revelation which focuses on dialog and not on mere submission.[1]

But the doctrine also has its downsides: A Godlike human being can see itself as disconnected from and superior to the rest of creation. We know an extreme form of this view in Gnostic and Neoplatonic traditions in Early Christianity: The Godlike element in us is supposed to be thought, reason, and pure spirit. The goal can only be overcoming one's physical attachments, becoming pure spirit, and overcoming the material world. But even though these extremes were rejected by mainstream Christian tradition, the idea that human nature is constituted mainly by cognitive abilities has been living on: Michelle Voss

1. See N. Vorster, Created in the Image of God. Understanding God's Relationship with Humanity, Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2011.

Roberts calls this the (misguided) *priority of the intellect*.[2] This priority has found its complement in large parts of Western Enlightenment philosophy, such as the work of Immanuel Kant who defended human exceptionalism based on human's capacity to reason and to make moral choices based upon reason.[3]

But did God create the universe solely for humans or for the evolvement of rational creatures? Some theologians (even myself in the past) argue like this: God created the world so that he can engage in a loving relationship with his creatures; a genuine loving relationship requires free will, and free will requires reason. As far as we know, reason and the ability to love, are only actualized in humanity. This argument implies that everything else—planets, ecosystems, plants, animals—are only there to serve the purpose of humanity.[4] As I understand it, in her pledge against human exceptionalism, Keller promotes the idea that non-human reality has its own dignity, or at least, that humanity is essentially embedded in non-human reality and thus has its dignity only in relation to the whole planet Earth.

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2. Michelle Voss Robert shows how Thomas Aquinas has promoted the ratiocentric model in Christianity; see "Embodiment, Anthropology, and Comparison: Thinking-Feeling with Non-Dual Saivism", in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. F. X. Clooney & K. v. Stosch, New York: Fordham University Press 2018, 137-163, 141-143.

3. Immanuel Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Cambridge University Press 2012, 15: "The fact that the human being can have the "I" in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a person, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person—i.e., through rank and dignity an entirely *different* being from things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes. This holds even when he cannot yet say 'I,' because he still has it in thoughts, just as all languages must think it when they speak in the first person, even if they do not have a special word to express this concept of 'I.' For this faculty (namely to think) is understanding."

4. Even if there are other intelligent species on other planets, the same theological problem arises regarding their eco-systems, as long as they include non-rational lifeforms.

I believe there is a link between a teleological theory of creation out of love and eco-theology, since love—and this is where some personal theists are mistaken—is also, but not only realized in loving relationships between personal agents. Clark Pinnock, although a famous promoter of open theism, accepts that there are multiple reasons for God to create. On the one hand he says that the "foundation of the significance of our creaturely existence is the fact the God delights in us and wants a relationship with us."[5] On the other hand, he writes:

"But God is also delighted with it, as an artist who loves to express creativity. Creation gives God an occasion, as it were, to express his unsurpassability. God is able, by creating the world, to actualize his own potential: not the potential to be God, but the potential to be the creator of a non-divine world and the potential to appreciate it. The world thus becomes part of God's experience and in this way is deeply meaningful to him. [...] Creation satisfied God's eternal disposition to love and to communicate. It reflects an abundant source of self-creativity and intensity of love and delight."[6]

As we can see, Christian theology contains both anthropocentric and biocentric strains. Still, anthropocentrism has dominated for the past 2000 years, resulting in many devoted Christians not caring about the welfare of animals, the mass extinction of species, or the climate crisis. The comparative theologian now asks: Can we possibly learn from other religions to give us intellectual resources to overcome Christian anthropocentrism? Michelle Voss Roberts has intensively discussed how Eastern religions can provide such resources. Can such resources be found in Islam, too? We have to be aware that—as there are different schools of thought in Christianity—there are different schools of thought, also different approaches and interpretations of Qur'anic verses in Islam. Indeed, there is a Muslim tradition similar to

5. C. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover. A Theology of God's Openness, Carlisle: Paternoster 2001, 125.
6. Ibid.

the Christian concept of *imago dei* where only human beings are seen as appointed by God as *khalīfas*: successors, delegates, or representatives (see Q 2:30). Of course, a proper interpretation of the Book of Genesis (1:26-28) reveals humans are not on Earth to exploit nature but to take responsible care of it.[7] But still: Such Muslim theologies may *favor* human exceptionalism, as many Christian theologies do using a similar concept. But likewise, there are disputes about a proper interpretation of what the responsibilities of a *khalīfa* are. It is commonly agreed that it includes stewardship over non-human creation. The Assisi Declaration on Humanity and Nature includes an interreligious agreement "[t]hat dominion cannot be anything other than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures".[8] *Stewardship in symbiosis* seems to be an interpretation that avoids anthropocentrism without giving up human exceptionalism.

In addition to weighing Biblical and Qur'anic arguments, one may argue that anthropocentric theologies fail to adequately address important ethical issues; and what fails to adequately address important ethical issues must be itself inadequate; thus, anthropocentric theologies are inadequate. However, this line of reasoning is too simplified. It is possible to defend human exceptionalism and still address climate change as a crucial and maybe the most critical ethical challenge humanity has ever faced. It is possible to be aware of our connectedness to the whole ecosystem through symbiosis without believing we are simply a part of the ecosystem. Even a mind-body-dualist can be a dedicated environmentalist! It is possible to think of humans as the

7. See V. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1–17, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990, 138: "What is expected of the king is responsible care over that which he rules. Thus, like 'image,' *exercise dominion* reflects royal language. Man is created to rule. But this rule is to be compassionate and not exploitative. Even in the garden of Eden he who would be lord of all must be servant of all."

8. The Assisi Declarations: Messages on Humanity and Nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam & Judaism, 1986, http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/THE%20ASSISI%20DECLARATIONS.pdf.

image of God without interpreting this title as a justification for the exploitation of nature or animals, but rather see it, as outlined, as a special responsibility God has given us for our planet.

I do not want to defend human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism here. But I think we still lack strong arguments why an open view of God is better or more adequate in addressing important social and ethical issues of our days. Personally, I prefer an open view of God not for social or political reasons but because it allows for a vivid relationship between God and human beings, allows for genuine free will and love, and because I believe in a God who created human beings in order to learn from them and grow together with them. The latter issue, a learning God, a God who grows in character—a scandal for most Christian and Muslim thinkers—is something I learned from an engagement with certain Jewish traditions.[9]

Although this motivation is anthropocentric at first, it can easily be extended to non-human creation: God might have wanted a vivid relationship with all of his creatures for their own sake, and he might even have a deep aesthetic appreciation for non-living nature. And as human beings can learn and grow by watching, engaging with, and taking care of nature, God might be able to learn and grow with creation, for example, by showing compassion for suffering animals, even before humans entered into the picture..[10] In light of this, one can hope for a cosmic salvation, which includes not only human beings but all entities being in what Keller calls "cosmic attunement"—an ideal that humans as co-creators can help gradually become a reality.

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9. See E. Klaphek, Das religiös-säkulare Spannungsfeld des Judentums, in *Säkulares Judentum aus religiöser Quelle*, ed. E. Klaphek & R. Calderon, Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich 2015, 9-48, 17.

10. A theory of a God who grows in character in relation to creation is defended by Peter Forrest, see *Developmental Theism: From Pure Will to Unbound Love*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2007.