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THE PERILS OF ENVIRONMENTAL TRUTHFULNESS

Summary. I start with the assumption that teachers must tell the truth. I sketch widely accepted reasons for environmental anxiety: problems in the management – or "stewardship" – of climate, biodiversity, soil, resources, and in confronting disease, before enumerating some passionately held orthodoxies, which would benefit from some reformulation, or from contextualization alongside generally overlooked or undervalued elements in the history of the making of the modern global environment. I focus on attempts to ascribe current problems to consequences of human behavior, such as supposed over-population, ill-regulated capitalism, madcap urbanization, industrialization, and anthropogenically induced climate change and disease. Without wishing to challenge conventional analyses, or minimize the role of human failings, I draw attention to under-appreciated facts: that some problems of the modern environment are results of trends traceable to early modern times and to structural features in the histories of climate and of the disease environment that are beyond human control and hardly susceptible to human influence. I suggest that some of our environmental problems are practically indefeasible. I conclude with reflections on why environmental education and public policy have, so far, barely taken account of the facts.

Resumen. Mi punto de partida es la suposición de que los profesores deben decir la verdad. En este sentido, esbozo razones ampliamente aceptadas en lo referente a la ansiedad ambiental: problemas en la gestión – o "administración" – del clima, la biodiversidad, el suelo, los recursos y los desastres naturales, antes de enumerar algunas ideas ortodoxas sostenidas con pasión, susceptibles de beneficiarse con alguna reformulación o con la contextualización de aquellas que generalmente se pasan por alto y cuyos elementos se encuentran minusvalorados en la historia del desarrollo del moderno medio ambiente global. Luego, presto mi atención en los intentos por atribuir el origen de los problemas actuales al comportamiento humano: la supuesta sobrepoblación, el capitalismo mal regulado, la urbanización descabellada, la industrialización y los cambios climáticos y sanitarios inducidos antropogénicamente. Ahora bien, sin desafiar los análisis convencionales, ni minimizar el papel de las fallas humanas, llamo la atención sobre datos frecuentemente subestimados: por ejemplo, el que algunos problemas del medio ambiente moderno son el resultado de tendencias presentes ya desde la raíz de la edad moderna, así como de algunas características estructurales en las historias del clima y de los desastres ambientales que escapan al control humano y que son difícilmente

susceptibles a su influencia. Posteriormente, sugiero que algunos de nuestros problemas ambientales son prácticamente irrenunciables. Concluyo reflexionando sobre por qué, hasta ahora, la educación ambiental y las políticas públicas, apenas si han tenido en cuenta los estos datos.

We tend to congratulate ourselves grimly on our power over an "Anthropocene" age, crafted by humans; but, as George W. Bush once said, with uncharacteristic sagacity, "Nature is still an awesome force" – the world's greatest superpower[1]. Environmental scientists' emphasis on anthropogenically induced problems is understandable, because such are the problems we may be able to do something to counter. But we cannot fully understand humans' part in the making of current environmental crises unless we take account of the full story that surrounds them, including the origins of such aspects of the modern environment as are beyond human control.

In the context of the pope's summons to us to craft a "pact" for environmental education, the specific challenge to the Church concerns the formulation of a precious doctrine: that of the stewardship or mastery of creation, which God, according to the writers of Genesis (1: 26-30) confided to "man." In commonly understood Catholic tradition, the divine commission was part of humans' "shared part in building the reign of God."[2] The notion of humankind as God's "chosen species"[3] faces serious challenges today: from developments in robotics and genetics[4];

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[1] *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, July 3rd 2006, XLII, Office of the Federal Register, Washington D.C. 2006, p. 1511.

[2] A. L. Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment and Our Place in the World*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001, p. 19.

[3] J. Burnside, *God, Justice and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 153. The term is associated in particular with J. L. Arsuaga and I. Martínez, *The Chosen Species*, Wiley-Blackwell, London 2005, and with A. Kuper, *The Chosen Primate*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

[4] S. Greenfield, *Tomorrow's People: How 21st Century Technology is Changing the Way we Think and Feel*, Allen Lane, London 2003; *Rethinking Human Nature: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, M. Jeeves ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2011. On robotics see a review of recent work in M. Dobrantu, *Snog, Marry, or Avoid: a Review of Three Radically Different Visions of the Future of Artificial Intelligence*, in *ESSSAT News and Reviews*, XXIX (2019) 4-17.