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The human being and the world as God's creation: Present-day ethical conflicts and consequences of the doctrine of creation in the perspective of the doctrine of justification

Author:
Ulrich H.J. Körtner[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Institute for Systematic Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

[2]Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Corresponding author:
Ulrich Körtner,
ulrich.koertner@univie.ac.at

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All the medical and bioethical questions, ranging from stem cell research to converging technologies and synthetic biology, touch on the question regarding the image of human beings and their position in the cosmos, by which we are able to orient ourselves. This article argues that the biblical belief in creation and the discourse about humans as created beings by and in the image of God can still be proclaimed as a viable form of human self-interpretation in the present. The distinction between practical knowledge and knowledge of orientation may be of help here. Guidance for how to live and act is not best found in abstract principles, but rather in meaningful stories, in metaphors and symbols. On this level, too, is also where faith in creation and the certainty of our own creatureliness is located.

Contribution: This article interprets the doctrine of creation by a hermeneutical theology. It analyses the interdependence between hermeneutics and criticism in the process of reinterpreting the classical propositions about the human being and the world as God's creation and the relation of anthropology and ethics. The aim is to show what might be the contribution of Christian faith in creation to the approach of an ethics of responsibility in the field of bioethics and ecology. The specific contribution of this article to current debates on an ethics of creation is the thesis that the key to a well-balanced theological approach to all this is the Pauline doctrine of justification as interpreted by the protestant reformers.

Keywords: doctrine of creation; ethics of creation; ethics of technology; anthropology; hermeneutical theology; justification by faith; ethics of responsibility.

The age of anthropology

'We live in an age of anthropology. A comprehensive scientific study of the human being is a major goal of contemporary intellectual endeavors', wrote the Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg decades ago (Pannenberg 1985:5). In the meantime, we have progressed to living in the biotechnological age. But even this, if considered properly, is an age of anthropology (cf. Körtner 1997, 2004, 2005). Based loosely on Karl Marx, philosophers and theologians in the past have merely interpreted humanity differently. The new life sciences, however, are all about changing it.

In earlier eras, too, it was assumed that humans are able and in need of change. On the one hand, humanity was regarded as a microcosm that mirrored the almost divine perfection of the macrocosm. On the other hand, earlier epochs also knew of the misery of humankind, their physical vulnerability and moral imperfection. The major religions are convinced that humankind is not only in need of healing but also in need of redemption. Besides the hope for salvation, the enhancement of mind and body is one of the ancient human dreams and nightmares. Past ages relied above all on education and training, on religion and morals or, after the Enlightenment, on politics and social engineering. Initially, the actual bio- or life science was ethics, which was understood as the theory of human conduct and lifestyle. The modern 'life sciences', on the other hand, comprises biology, biochemistry and molecular medicine.

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The new anthropotechnics focuses on the technical manipulation of the human body and its biological constitution down to the smallest building blocks: the cells, genes and molecules. Like the body, the human mind, too, is becoming the object of biotechnical intervention. From a neurobiological point of view, the mind is a system property of the brain. The combination of genetics or genomics, neurobiology, information science and nanotechnology inspire visions of novel procedures in the human brain, be it to cure mental or neurological diseases or to enhance intelligence and memory performance.

Underneath all the medical and bioethical questions, ranging from stem cell research to converging technologies – that is, the combination of nano-, bio-, information- and cognitive sciences – and synthetic biology, which is involved in the creation of artificial deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and whole organisms (cf. Boldt, Müller & Maio 2009; eds. Dabrock et al. 2011; Rehmann-Sutter 2013), the question arises regarding the image of humanity and its position in the cosmos, by which we are able to orient ourselves. There is no unanimous answer to the question of what humanity is. As different as the various images of humanity in the past and present, so different are the ethical concepts.

The stereotypical notion of the image of humanity, that is, the Christian image of humanity, is, of course, an unhistorical construction. Not only does *the* Christian or *the* humanistic image of humanity exist in this uniform way, but both are subject to historical transformation processes that are, amongst other things, the product of engaging and grappling with the Enlightenment and with the insights and progress of modern natural and human sciences and social upheavals such as the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society and on to a post-industrial service economy and information society.

Moreover, there are significant differences between the various Christian traditions not only in dogmatic but also in anthropological questions, such as the concept of nature, the understanding of human freedom and the concept of sin. Related to this is the fact that the response of the churches and of individual Christians can vary in ethical questions. The Christian view of humanity thus shows a certain plurality, which in part even exists across the individual denominations. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of Christian *images* of humanity rather than *the* Christian image of humanity.

Concepts of the nature of human beings are the result of complex cultural and religious hermeneutical processes. It is therefore one-sided to merely ask how long the technological progress is (still) compatible with a certain image of humanity. It is also necessary to ask to what extent an ideological or religious tradition can succeed in productively processing historical changes and re-interpreting outdated traditions in order to enable present-day people to meaningfully interpret their own existence under contemporary conditions. From an ethical point of view, there is no doubt that a certain anthropology always has a critically discerning role[1] too. *Criticism and hermeneutics are, however, dialectically interrelated* (cf. Körtner 2005:23ff).[2] This does not mean that technological progress should be accepted without criticism. Rather, within this tension between hermeneutics and critique, the ambivalences of this epochal process must be considered.

Criticism of technology is concerned with the bounds of what is ethically permissible: the limit beyond which the use of science and technology leads to inhumanity. The *hermeneutical* problem of technology, however, is concerned with what it means for the way a person perceives himself or herself – their self-image – if, in the future, they are to regard themselves as a technically produced product, made by someone of their own species. How can the concept of human dignity still be meaningful under these circumstances? And what significance does the concept of the Image of God, originating from the Jewish and Christian tradition, still hold? Will humankind, with and under these technical assisted circumstances of their coming-into-being, still be able to hold the personal belief that, in the end, it was God who created them 'along with all creatures' (Small Catechisms, Martin Luther)?

If a claim to truth is to be made for the biblical belief in creation, it must still be valid even under the conditions of modern biomedicine. If the conviction that humankind was created in the image of God should be utterly dispensed with because of the use of certain assisted reproductive technologies, then the creation account would become an obsolete myth (cf. Bultmann 1961:5 passim). If, however, the speech about humans as created beings by and in the image of God can still be proclaimed as a way of interpreting human existence in and through faith, then this must still be a viable form of human self-interpretation in the present. The distinction between practical knowledge and knowledge of orientation may be of help here. Guidance for how to live and act is not best found in abstract principles, but rather in meaningful stories, in metaphors and symbols. On this level, too, is also where faith in creation and the certainty of our own creatureliness is located.

Ethics as applied anthropology?

The Protestant theologian Wolfgang Trillhaas held the view that all ethics is 'in every sense applied anthropology' (Trillhaas 1970:19). The term 'applied' is, of course, just as misleading as the term 'applied ethics' used today. It suggests that it is merely a matter of casuistically applying a somehow already established image of humankind to practical problems of life. It is unclear who or what is applied to what by whom? Who is the subject of the application?

1.Translated by Carina Ratzka MTh.

2.The dialectical interrelationship between the hermeneutics of technology and the criticism of technology is not sufficiently taken into account by a 'heuristic of fear', as demanded by Hans Jonas. The heuristic of fear holds that a negative prognosis of the future should always take precedence over positive future scenarios and therefore, in case of doubt, technical progress should be avoided (cf. Jonas 1984:26f., 202ff.).

Who are the addressees? And does 'applied anthropology' mean that anthropological reflection comes before action, or does it mean the subsequent accountability of our morally justified decisions?

The concept of applied ethics faces similar difficulties. It is unclear, for example, what is actually applied in the so-called applied ethics: principles, criteria and norms or models, paradigms, examples and experiences; in other words, what is commonly called 'topics' or 'topology' (from Ancient Greek: τόπος, meaning 'place'), the theory of general argument sources or typical situations? However, if applied ethics is understood in the sense of *Topics*, it is not possible to speak of the application of an ethical theory. Indeed, there is a discrepancy between theoretical and applied ethics (cf. Nida-Rümelin 1996:42).

Therefore, the tasks and subject matter of, for example, medical ethics are more aptly characterised by German philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin's concept of 'Bereichsethik' – ethics specific to a certain field or 'field ethics' – rather than by the term applied ethics (cf. Nida-Rümelin 1996:63). Johannes Fischer assumes that different fields of practice 'confront us with different types of problems that require different kinds of *ethical reflection*' (Fischer 2002:34). Business ethics, legal ethics, political ethics, research ethics, media ethics, bio- and medical ethics are the most important examples of such 'field ethics'. Just as it cannot be a matter of adapting morality or ethos to the supposed 'practical constraints' of the various fields of practice, the goal of ethical reflection cannot be to (Honecker 1999):

> [*E*]stablish and fix the moral status quo. Rather, it is necessary to continuously and critically review moral standards of the traditional ethos and examine their effects on social and individual practice. (p. 272)

The same applies to anthropology. What humankind is – what it can, should or want to be – is not certain from the outset, but must be spelled out anew again and again in all ethical conflicts about medical and technical innovations as well as in political and social developments and upheavals.

According to Immanuel Kant, there are three basic questions that concern humankind: *What can I know*? *What ought I do*? *What may I hope for*? All three questions, however, lead to a fourth and final question: *What is humankind*? (Kant 1987:25). In view of the rapid pace of technological progress and the economic, political and social upheaval it has triggered, the fundamental questions formulated by Kant are in danger of being easily lost sight of. Being confused, says the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, we late modernists ask: *What was it again that we wanted to know*? We are no less perplexed when it comes to answering Kant's question about what is right and what is wrong or about what constitutes a well-founded hope and a humane future.

Even more difficult is the question of how to define the humanity of human beings. This involves not only the contentious definition of *what* humankind is, but also *who* is to be regarded as human, that is, whether a distinction can or even must be made between the human organism and the person, when the life of a human individual begins and when it ends, to what extent it can and may be medically and technically modified, as well as whether biological differences between living species or between animate and inanimate matter merely mark a technical boundary or whether they also mark a moral and ethical one.

In his novel *Zelfportret met tulban* (1961), Dutch writer Harry Mulisch answered the question of what humankind is in an unusual way: 'The answer is: "*What is man*?"'. The question, to which the question of what humankind is, answers to, is the same question, 'for humankind is not an answer, but a question' (quotation by Hörisch 2004: 423).

Anthropology is concerned with the question of what is humankind. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, however, pointed out that if the answer to a question could not be pronounced, the question cannot be pronounced either (Wittgenstein 1977:114). So how can humankind be understood as a question if we do not know the answer to this question? Theology enquires after the answer to which humankind is the question. The religious symbol for this answer is the word 'God'. The answer to which the word 'God' refers to, however, does not silence the question that is humankind, but constantly provokes it in new ways. How this happens is one of the topics of theological anthropology.

The debate over the introduction of new biotechnological and medical techniques as well as their legal regulation and political control does not only involve the so-called moral values but ultimately also basic religious convictions. The obvious or latent religious hopes and assertive claims connected to technological progress require critical examination. This is not only the task of philosophy and religious studies, which consider themselves as cultural studies, but also of theology.

Image and construct

One of the main difficulties in the bioethical and biopolitical discourse of modern, pluralistic society is that neither a generally binding religious nor a generally valid metaphysical basic orientation can be presupposed. Four decades ago, Pannenberg was already clairvoyant when he stated that '[*i*]n the general consciousness, the sciences concerned with humankind are now well on their way of occupying the place that in earlier centuries was held by metaphysics' (Pannenberg 1985:5). Provided that these sciences not only analyse and interpret the humanity of humankind, but also actively change it, the character of anthropology also changes. Anthropology is no longer just concerned with the *re*construction of the human being, but its *construction*. Statements about the supposed essence of humankind or nature as a whole are replaced by projects and projections about the changeable being.

Being human involves not only understanding one's own life but also designing it. Philosopher Martin Heidegger has declared the design to be 'the existential' of the human being (Heidegger 1996:135ff.). In the age of bio- and anthropotechnics the phrase 'life design', one's plan for one's own life, takes on an entirely new meaning. It now means the technical design, according to which life is designed, planned and changed.

Every anthropologist has the objective of creating an image of humankind 'after our likeness' (cf. Gn 1:26). Since ancient times, self-knowledge has been considered the highest form of knowledge. According to a classical definition, truth is the *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, that is, the correspondence between statement and fact. The 'adequateness' of the two can, of course, be achieved in two ways: either by aligning a statement or theory with reality or by changing reality in order to make it more fitting to one's image or version of it.

The concept of the image of humankind is correspondingly ambiguous. Just like the self-image that people construct of themselves, the images of humanity that are based on a scientific, philosophical, cultural–scientific or theological anthropology are not merely an image of humankind, its nature and its essence. Every image of humankind always has the character of a design. Images are constructs that do not simply reflect reality but actively influence and change this reality. The extent to which the image we or others have of ourselves is a realistic image, an ideal image, a desired image or a distorted image must be proven anew in each case. Likewise, do self-description and the description ascribed by others have to coincide?

Provided that the image of humankind interacts with new anthropotechnics and a progressive medicalisation of human life, the difference between one's own definition of self and that of others is of considerable relevance. From a political and social perspective, it ought to be questioned who the subjects or institutions are that attempt to design and bring about new images of humankind. *Do people want to be in command of themselves – or in charge of others whom they wish to shape according to their own image and their own ideals*? *And who indeed gives people the right to be in command of others in this way, especially the unborn*? *Are all attempts or fantasies to optimise and enhance human nature covered by the principle of autonomy*? *Does self-determination – even the reproductive autonomy proclaimed today – not turn into an unbearable heteronomy for those who are the object of such manipulations*? *Where do the boundaries lie between the ethically legitimate desire for healing and the unethical desire for eugenics*?

Ethics and technology

Research ethics must be clear about the fundamental connection between technology and modern science. The philosopher Helmut Plessner already described the human form of existence, which is determined by technology as natural artificiality. With synthetic biology and converging technologies, that is, the combination of nano-, life-, information- and cognitive sciences, natural artificiality reaches a new level of development. Nature is always a conceptual and epistemological construct. The meaning of the linguistic sign 'nature' is always constructed in different scientific and cultural interpretation practices. In the course of the history of technology, however, nature has also increasingly become a technical construction. Nature's *telos* has continually been transformed from being meaningful in itself to its meaningfulness predominantly being determined in relation to human action. Therefore, before individual questions of material ethics may be addressed, a contemplation of elementary questions such as one's world view and view of humankind is necessary, as well as an examination of the essence of modern technology and the understanding of life determined by it.

The position of humankind in nature is characterised by its technical treatment of the very same, which differs significantly from animal behaviour. Human technology is not limited to the use of aids, which can also be observed in animals. Rather, the use of technology is based on objectives and methods that apply the idea of causality in a planned manner (cf. Cassirer 1996:185). Even though humankind is not solely determined by its use of technology, 'humanity *is*, nevertheless, in its special position *because* of technology. Technology is thus constitutive and determines the essence and being of humankind' (Fischer 2004:9). All research and bioethics have to take this under consideration.

According to Martin Heidegger, the essence of technology determines modern science from the very beginning (Heidegger 1977). Modern technology is not a mere application of science but is its basis. Scientific experiments use technical appliances and instruments that help to prepare and arrange nature in such a way that exact measurements can be made. According to the famous dictum of Galileo Galilei, modern science consists of measuring what can be measured and making measurable what cannot be measured. The calculative and computational view of nature, that is, the mathematisation of natural sciences that was declared the measure of all science by logical positivism, for example, is only made possible by technology and technical progress.[3]

Because the nature of modern technology determines modern science in all its disciplines, ethical debates around science and research are strongly focused on and influenced by the questions of ethics of technology (cf. eds. Grunwald & Simonidis-Puschmann 2013). Ethics of technology, however, can mean two things. On the one hand, ethics of technology is understood to be an ethics for technology based on technology assessment. Technical ethics in this sense is a form of applied ethics or a field ethics. On the other hand, technical ethics can also be understood more fundamentally as an ethics based on the nature of technology. Ethics of technology in this sense is not concerned with external moral or ethical norms of technology but discusses 'the possibility of an

3.For example, the invention of the telescope to explore the macrocosm and the microscope to explore the microcosm led to the replacement of pre-modern natural philosophical speculation by a technical kind of speculation in the literal sense of the word. The observation of nature with the naked eye and a philosophical view of nature were replaced by observation with technical instruments.

internal moral justification grounded on the essence of technology' (Fischer 2004:200).

On closer inspection, however, one is faced with an irritating dilemma. The demand for a renewal of ethics or for a new type of ethics may be understood as a protest against technological rationality. It sounds like the expression of humankind's discomfort in civilisation (Sigmund Freud). However, it is part of the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972) that the very same has completed the rule of modern technology, precisely that technocracy which first evoked a large part of the ethical conflicts for which solutions are so urgently sought today. Even the leaders of the Enlightenment who were critical of society still participate in the modern 'trend towards technology', as the philosopher Walter Schulz noted five decades ago (Schulz 1972:631).

Amongst contemporary German theologians, Michael Trowitzsch has, in his intense and passionate conversation with Martin Heidegger on the one hand and Karl Barth on the other, like no other drawn attention to modern technocracy and the calculating spirit that shapes it (cf. Trowitzsch 1988). He has shrewdly worked out how the technocratic and, consequently, nihilistic will to power also takes hold of the ethical reasoning voiced in opposition. The ethical search for pragmatic solutions to technocratic problems and conflicts bears the hallmarks of technical rationality.

The question arises, however, whether the conflict of interpretation to which the phenomenon of the ethical is exposed can – from the perspective of theology – be perceived not only as a crisis but also as a chance for reconsideration. To that end, Honecker (2003) asked whether ethics should be based on reason alone or whether:

> the illuminating power of love which is not the product of rational calculation, [*as well as*] the encouraging power of hope and trust, [*and*] of faith which transcends the existing [*is not, too, required*]. (p. 199)

In the conflict of interpretations, the aporias of the ethical offer an occasion to reflect on dimensions of life 'which humankind itself cannot actively produce, but which it can only comprehend and grasp in the form of promise and offer' (Honecker 2003:199).

According to Wolfgang van den Daele, both religious and secular bioethics can be understood as an attempt to 'moralise human nature': 'What has become technically available through science is to be made normatively unavailable again through moral control' (Van den Daele 2002:56). A closer look reveals, however, that the terms 'nature' and 'life' are confusingly ambiguous. What makes matters worse is that the concept of life, like that of nature, is often religiously charged. Even Habermas (2003), who resolutely wanted to do without a religious perspective, is of the opinion that:

> [*F*]or the person to feel one with its body, it seems that this body has to be experienced as something natural – as a continuation of the organic self-regenerative life from which the person was born. (p. 58)

In the religious exaltation of the self-regenerating life there is also a danger for Christian ethics. For if it gives in to an offhand use of the word 'life' it is in danger of being confused with a religious opportunist dispensing commonplace wisdom. It is often claimed that all life as such should be regarded as sacred. This will seem like an extreme radicalisation of ethics – but only for a moment – for in truth it amounts to its very abdication. For 'where everything is sacred, nothing is sacred anymore' (Türcke 1997:100).

According to Michael Trowitzsch, 'relying on "ethics" does not liberate from the power sphere of technocracy any more than wanting to regain "religion"' (Trowitzsch 1988:154).[4] Instead of offhandedly and religiously reinforcing the moralisation of human nature propagated by Habermas, just the opposite is needed: an essential task of theology consists in the critical examination of ideologies as well as of social and ecclesiastical tendencies of the resacralisation of human nature or, more precisely, of the forms of human life that are initially technically abstracted from personal existence and biography. For this is precisely what *in vitro* fertilised embryos, for example, are about.

Unavailability of life?

The fact that theology can also make an important contribution to the environmental and bioethical discussion is, amongst other things, because of the fact that the concept of life in bioethical contexts is often based on a 'cryptic theology' (Frey 1998:98), which must be competently and critically discussed. It is necessary, for example, to deal critically with the frequently encountered expression of 'the unavailability of life'.

The argument of the undisposibility of life is often used not only against the application of genetic engineering methods in medicine but also in plant and animal breeding and food production. At a closer look, it is not universally valid. As much as the belief in creation of the Judeo-Christian tradition may have an orienting function for ethics, no direct instructions for action can be derived from it. In the sense of the biblical tradition, creation is the anthropomorphic, that is, the culturally shapeable habitat of the humankind, just as, conversely, humankind is a co-creator of creation. In other words, biblical tradition approves of humankind not only as a product but also as a factor of evolution. It is therefore of ethical relevance if humans see themselves as well as their environment as God's creation, for in that case all planning and action of humankind raises the question of its essence and the meaning of its actions. The purpose of individual actions, however, ought to be distinguished from a person's general lifestyle. Faith in creation is a specific answer to the question of the meaning of human life, but not to the question of purpose of individual actions.

4.On his critique of modernity, see also Trowitzsch (1999).

The argument of the unavailability of human life is the reversal of the naturalistic fallacy. If one confuses positive statements with prescriptive or normative statements, then a moral appeal comes in the form of a descriptive statement, a normative statement uttered in the form of a positive statement. Against the concealed normative statement that it is immoral to be in command of one's own life as well as that of others, Eberhard Amelung objects that '[*i*]f there is an order of creation, then it is that of mutual disposal' (Amelung 1986:22). Our life is such that we must constantly dispose of other life. The question, therefore, is not whether we should do this, but how we can do it in an ethically sound manner – in a way that the ends do not justify the means and in a manner that values and respects not only the dignity of humankind but also the intrinsic value of animals, for instance.

In secular society the argument of the unavailability of life ought to remind us that humankind has a natural basis that must not be destroyed because our own life is bound to it. From a theological point of view, however, it must be criticised if humanity's absolute dependence on God as expressed in the creation account is confused with humankind's dependency on nature.

However, creation and evolutionary, biological nature simply identical. What is meant by creation must certainly be visible in nature, but it is not indistinguishably one because every statement of creation is valuable. A confession of faith in creation repeats the sentence with which the first account of creation in the Genesis chapter 1 ends: 'And it was very good'. However, admittedly, too often this statement is a contested confession against the experience of a life marked by senselessness and destruction.

However, if every human being in order to be able to live themselves must have other life at their disposal, then the cultural mandate in Genesis to 'fill the earth, and subdue it' (cf. Gn 1:28; 2:15) is, as it were, democratised. Therefore, in principle, the Christian faith in creation corresponds to the approach of an ethics of responsibility ('Verantwortungsethik'), which understands responsibility in the field of bioethics as the responsibility of all members of society and – as a political consequence – demands the greatest possible participation of all in any upcoming decision-making processes.

This brings me to my second point. If the actions of God and those of humankind in the sense of the biblical faith in creation are related to each other but categorically distinguished, then there are not clearly definable *a priori* limits to human action in general or in the fields of life sciences and medicine in particular. Rather, boundaries must be redefined on a case-to-case basis.

Even though, by ways of distinguishing between creator and creature, there seem to be areas where human intervention is strictly forbidden at first sight. In fact, however, humanity is condemned to intervene even in the areas of birth and death. With medical progress, we have been given a responsibility also concerning the limits of life from which we cannot escape by arbitrary self-limitation, not even with reference to supposedly Christian basic truths. Certainly, there is a kind of basic human passivity without which humankind would not be human. Being born and having to die is part of this passivity. However, the realisation of our basic passivity or absolute dependence on God has to ethically acquit itself in a tense dialectic of resistance and surrender. Under no circumstances must it be misused to shift the responsibility to God when, in truth, it is entrusted to us. According to Christian conviction, this is precisely what we have to recognise before God. Accordingly, we must ask ourselves again and again how we can responsibly handle the medical and biotechnological possibilities available to us, bearing in mind that human life is a gift.

Preservation of creation?

Like the argument about the unavailability of life, the commonly used phrase of 'the preservation of creation' must also be examined theologically. The preservation of creation, once the promise of its Creator God, has become the epitome of human responsibility in the face of ecological dangers. Besides the establishment of peace and justice, the preservation of creation is also one of the fundamental ethical demands of the conciliar process of the churches.

It seems that the biblical anthropological injunction in Genesis 2:15, according to which humankind should cultivate and tend to the Garden of Eden, seems to have been extended to the entire earth and its future destiny. In the history of dogma, the concept of the preservation of creation was certainly not at all part of anthropology or ethics, but part of the doctrine of God. After all, *conservatio craeturae* or *conservatio mundi* refers not to the acts of humankind but to God's current creating work (Heppe & Bizer 1958:200ff.; Körtner 2020:326–329; cf. Ratschow 1966:218ff.). The application of these terms to the human creation mandate in Genesis 2:15 marks a profound transformation of the Christian doctrine of creation, which fits into the modern shift towards overemphasising ethics in Christian theology, initiated by Immanuel Kant.

In place of a dogmatic theology and the theological ethics that come with it, Kant introduced an 'ethico-theology' which transforms traditional contents of dogmatic doctrines into ethical statements (cf. Kant 2007:271ff. [§ 86]). Today's programmes of an ethical theology, for example, those of Buri (1978) or Rendtorff (1980:14ff.), are ultimately based on Kant's epistemological destruction of pre-modern 'physico-theology' and its cosmological and teleological proofs for the existence of God.

If the insistence for a so-called 'ethics of creation'[5] participates in this epochal transformation process, the moral appeal to preserve creation is not as easily rejected by theology as Rendtorff (1988) or Lange (1994) would

5.On the discussion of creation ethics, environmental ethics or bioethics, see the literature review by Frey (1988, 1989) and Cahill (2007).

make one believe. Both question whether the 'preservation of creation' is a meaningful ethical term at all, when otherwise, according to Christian understanding, creation and thus its preservation must be considered the sole work of God. At least when the preservation of creation by humankind is spoken of unthinkingly, the idea of God's dependence on humanity's work is implied. 'This is such an absurd thought that the superfluousness of a discussion is evident' (Lange 1994:157). Instead, Lange stresses to think of creation and its preservation strictly theologically, that is, as God's action, or more precisely, as *creatio continua* (Lange 1994:157).

Admittedly, initially this is a mere postulate. Whether and how God's action can be understood in light of all the knowledge acquired since the enlightenment is precisely the decisive question originally posed by Kant at the latest (cf. Körtner 2020:160–164, 236–242, 329–331). The accusation of a hybrid 'eco-soteriology' (Timm 1987:352) is easily made not only against some representatives of an ethics of creation but also against many church statements on environmental destruction or genetic engineering. Granted, even the criticism of the 'preservation of creation' argument may contribute towards the overemphasising of ethics of the doctrine of creation. This is the case with Rendtorff, for example, who for his part reduces the doctrine of *conservatio mundi* to a pragmatic sense of action.

According to Rendtorff (1988), this expression:

> [*S*]hould first and foremost express a kind of basic trust, which should prove its applicability by being soberly and realistically expressed in the task of preserving the natural environment of humankind. The *concern for the whole*, which nobody and no one is seriously and effectively able to do, must be realized in particular in the *wisdom of a pragmatic way of dealing with the world* and ad usum hominem. (p. 249)

In light of the modern-day state of the discussion determined by Kant and the dangers threatening the survival of the earthly biosphere today, two different paths are taken to re-interpret the doctrine of the preservation of creation, both of which are theologically problematic. By overemphasising the ethical implications of this doctrine on the one hand, the Christian distinction between God and humankind, creator and creation, is in danger of becoming obsolete whilst, on the other hand, the ethical reflection threatens to become completely unrelated if we merely affirm the exclusively theological content of the doctrine of creation (cf. Von Lüpke 1989, 1992).[6] That both areas of thought are related to each other is, however, the prerequisite not only for a decidedly theological ethics, but conversely also for the justification of a dogmatic theology that is independent of ethics. In order to convincingly counter the soteriological hubris of some approaches to environmental ethics and church appeals on humanity's responsibility for creation, it is not enough to dogmatically insist on God being the acting subject in creation. The question is rather how God's action, as claimed by the Christian faith, is to be understood in such a way that humanity can relate to this action. The disbanding of the argument of God's action into ethics and with that into anthropology can only be avoided if it is *distinguished from human action* as well as if it is subject not only of meaningful dogmatic but also *of ethical reflection*. In my opinion, the key to a well-balanced theological approach to all this is the Pauline doctrine of justification as interpreted by the Protestant reformers. It also functions as a corrective to all attempts to one-sidedly re-interpret the Christian doctrine of creation purely in terms of wisdom theology.

6.See also the critique by Planer-Friedrich (1989), and in response to him and Von Lüpke (Rendtorff 1989).

The doctrine of justification and environmental ethics

Modern interpretations of the Pauline-reformatory doctrine of justification are often faced with the accusation of having led to the loss of a world-oriented Christian theology. The fact that there have been acosmic tendencies in recent history of theology should by no means be denied. Today, however, we are confronted with the threatening situation that it is not the Christian faith but the dominance of modern technology that leads to the alienation from the biosphere and, at the same time, to the loss of self. It is not the frequently scolded anthropocentrism but precisely its loss that is one of the essential causes of the destruction of nature. To counteract this, it is crucial to regain an anthropocentric understanding of nature.

The natural sciences speak about the anthropic principle, which can be summarised in the sentence: '[*w*]e see the universe as it is because we exist' (Hawking 1998:128). This anthropic principle is not only epistemologically but also ethically irreducible. A concept of nature or physiocentrism that transcends the human being as a subject of ethics does not make it easier, but rather more difficult, to arrive at solid conclusions on ecological ethics. In ethical terms, the anthropic principle means that today the aim is to develop an 'ethos of ecologically oriented humanity' (Irrgang 1992:50–72; cf. Schlitt 1992:123ff.).

The problem of the doctrine of creation thus proves to be an epistemological and ethical problem of anthropology. However, it is indeed the doctrine of justification that urgently raises the question of the concrete constitution of the human subject who recognises creation and lives and acts within it. Through the experiencing of faith in the God who justifies a sinful humanity, that is, soteriologically and Christologically mediated, the reality of creation and its preservation as a strictly theological – not an ethical – matter becomes accessible in a new and ultimate way. The preserving action of God on and in his creation is not exclusive, but is primarily describable as an experience of faith, that is, as a way of self-knowledge. The Christologically mediated *conservatio mundi* (Trowitzsch 1993):

> [*T*]o say it oddly, begins with me. The preservation of creation, as Jesus Christ carries it out, preserves me as a creature, conveys to me my created existence and thus allows me to be truly human, unbiased and relaxed. (p. 437)

The conveying of faith in justification to the creaturely existence implies a connection to fellow creatures.

The consequences of the doctrine of justification for environmental ethics can only be briefly outlined here. Through the experience of faith in justification, the idea of the divine preservation of creation is both anthropocentric and theological. Neither does the anthropocentricity of the doctrine of justification have to lead to acosmic tendencies nor does a theological understanding of the preservation of creation legitimise an environmental and ethical quietism. Indeed, it is rather the doctrine of justification, which describes the basic human situation as forensic that may serve as the basis for an approach of an ethics of responsibility ('Verantwortungsethik'), which includes the non-human world.

One of the fundamental insights of this for the relationship of humans to nature is that of limitation and this is in several respects. Believers see themselves referred back to God's command in Genesis 2:15 but are freed from all soteriological claims through the doctrine of justification. Humanity is neither called to save nor to technocratically perfect the world. The doctrine of justification is therefore critical of both ecological prophecies of doom and political and technological utopias.

The fundamental insight into the limitation of our actions also refers to the degree of human responsibility for the future of the earth and humanity. The global responsibility of the whole of humanity and for the future of our planet, which is repeatedly asserted today, is strangely vague and subjectless and is therefore difficult to translate into purposeful action. The doctrine of justification leads to an understanding of concrete, that is, equally subjective and limited responsibility. Only such a responsibility can be perceived and accepted at all. The subject, conscious of its responsibility, must feel responsible for the whole, but not for everything in its concrete sphere of life.

Lastly, the insight of limitation also concerns the finiteness of ourselves as well as our lifeworld. An environmental ethics based on the theology of justification interprets human dealings with nature in the tension between Genesis 2:15 and 1 Corinthians 7:31. The faith in justification reveals reality as God's creation, which on the one hand is preserved by God, but on the other hand in the process of coming to an end. The idea implied in Genesis 8:22, that the continuance of the world is a temporary one, pushes itself completely to the fore in the New Testament. The Pauline eschatological hope for the non-human creation as expressed in Romans 8:18–24[7] lies not in its continued existence but in its participation in the new creation (καινὴ κτίσις)[8] promised to those of faith. According to the New Testament, the mere continuation of creation is not the goal of God's saving work. In the New Testament, both the preservation of the existing creation and humanity's work in and among it are always regarded in the context of the eschatological hope. Not only marriage and procreation but also work and trade are subject to the Pauline proviso of ὡς μή (1 Cor 7:25ff.). Paul urges Christians to work not in order to cultivate and preserve the earth, but to be economically independent of their pagan environment.[9] The unlimited survival of humanity and its habitat and culture are neither part of the promise of the New Testament nor is it the purpose of faith. Doctrines of salvation that aim at the salvation and restoration of the endangered creation as well as technocratic utopias of a world constructed by humankind and a completely manipulated nature all are connected to a human dream of immortality. In contrast to this utopia, the faith in justification leads to the acknowledgement of our finiteness and mortality and, as a consequence, to a careful selection and restriction of our actions and goals. Indeed, this is exactly how we learn what it means to cultivate and preserve the earth.

7.Romans 8:18ff. speaks about κτίσις, in contrast to 1 Corinthians 7:31, where the passing away of the κόσμος is announced. On the exegesis of Romans 8:18ff., which is overused in the current creational–theological and environmental–ethical discussion, see, for example, Wolter (2014).

8.2 Corinthians 5:17.

9.See 1 Thessalonians 4:12. See also 1 Corinthians 9:1ff., esp. v19.

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