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Understanding the Concept of Ecological Sin: Towards Optimizing the Discourse on the Anthropocene

Razumevanje koncepta ekološkega greha: na poti k optimizaciji diskurza o antropocenu

Abstract: Concern for the natural environment has been an important topic in today's world. In this context, the concept of ecological sin appears. Although it is making an increasing career in public discourse, is still ambiguous. This situation significantly distorts public and academic discussions about ecology, environmental ethics and the Anthropocene. An in-depth explanation of the issues of ecological sin and its theological and social context is the goal of this study. Since the idea of ecological sin originates from Christian theology, its full understanding requires looking at this issue from this perspective. Here, sin is presented as the misappropriation of the order discovered by reason and confirmed by experience. This article is intended to be the voice of a Christian (Catholic) moral theologian in the discourse on the Anthropocene and environmental ethics.

Keywords: Anthropocene, ecological sin, ecological debate, environmental ethics, ecological morality, sin

Povzetek: Skrb za naravno okolje je ena ključnih tem sodobnega sveta. V tem okviru se pojavlja tudi pojem ekološkega greha, ki si v javnem diskurzu vse bolj utira pot, a ostaja dvoumen. Takšna nejasnost bistveno vpliva na javne in akademske razprave o ekologiji, okoljski etiki in antropocenu. Namen naše študije je poglobljena razlaga problematike ekološkega greha ter njegovega teološkega in družbenega ozadja. Ker ideja ekološkega greha izhaja iz krščanske teologije, njegovo celovito razumevanje zahteva obravnavo znotraj tega okvira. Greh je v njem predstavljen kot zloraba reda, ki ga razkriva razum in potrjuje izkušnja. Članek želi k razpravi o antropocenu in okoljski etiki prispevati glas krščanskega (katoliškega) moralnega teologa.

Ključne besede: antropocen, ekološki greh, ekološka razprava, okoljska etika, ekološka morala, greh

1. Introduction: Context, Assumptions and Goals

The impetus for systematic scientific research on the subject of caring for the natural environment and protecting it from the adverse effects of civilization is considered to be the report *Man and His Environment* presented by Sithu U Thant, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, at the 1968 session of the General Assembly. The document justified the need to create a scientific theory that, when applied in practice, would result in reducing human interference that is destroying the environment. In addition to seeking ways to preserve the natural environment in its least altered form, particularly including maintaining the biodiversity and the purity of waters, soils and air, there was a reflection on the broad responsibility for the ravages wrought on nature. In this way, concern for nature and human activity involving interference ceased to be only objects of scientific inquiry by naturalists but also became issues considered by representatives of social sciences, law, philosophy and theology (Podzielny 2014; Wyrostkiewicz 2010).

As part of the ongoing scientific reflection on the harmfulness of certain behaviours towards nature, the phrase “ecological sin” was introduced. In the last decade of the twentieth century, this expression gained a permanent place in science, becoming one of the “technical terms” used in philosophy (Bajda 1999) and theology (Becker 1992). At the beginning of the 21st century, it was already functioning as a term for inappropriate moral behaviour evident in man’s relationship with nature (Wyrostkiewicz 2008; 2020; Bar 2020).

The term “ecological sin” is used to describe different and sometimes contradictory behaviours. Incorporated into political discourse, ecological sin is treated as a sure-fire weapon in the struggle for power – which was also done by generally introducing both ecological and religious issues into political argumentation (Jenkins 2021, 1–2). To accuse someone of committing an ecological sin is to place them in the ranks of the untrustworthy – people who destroy what is basic and necessary for human life. On the other hand, politicians who commonly invoke the conscience clause in connection with a desire to avoid an ecological sin claim that this is an excellent reason to abandon or block a project’s implementation. In this way, ecological sin today ceases to be an issue in the area of religion, instead becoming a social, legal and political issue. Essentially, the situations pointed out apply not only to political life but to contemporary people’s life situations. Ecological sin, although often undefined, is treated as an irrefutable argument.

The popularity of the term “ecological sin” and its frequent use in various contexts related to the environment, politics and social life makes it a worthy topic of systematic reflection, the reason for understanding and clarifying this issue, a fundamental issue for practicing science. One of the goals of this research study is to precisely define ecological sin and show how it manifests itself in the modern world. This article is intended to be the voice of a moral theologian in the public discourse on the Anthropocene and ecological ethics.

The topic appears to be quite pressing, as it has appeared all too often in public and political discourse in recent months due to increased discussions on climate

change and the energy problems that almost all economies in the world are currently experiencing. In the ongoing discussions, it is not uncommon to hear Pope Francis and various offices of the Holy See refer to the ethical obligations associated with “care for the common home” (Francis 2015), the Earth with its natural resources. This is the context in which ecological sin is spoken of, that, not quite correctly, is most often equated with human action against nature, meaning the misappropriation of nature involving overly expansive management and robbery of its resources, resulting in the serious disruption of ecosystems (Mueggenborg 2020). Today, this understanding of ecological sin appears to be a simplification. The humanistic, and especially theological, perspective calls for verifying the current concept of ecological sin so that it includes – as far as possible – all manifestations of improper treatment of nature. As already said, this is one of the goals of this article.

As already pointed out, there is no doubt that “ecological sin” is a phrase taken from the theological dictionary. Sin, in its original and basic meaning, is a theological reality (Vidal 1994, 651–54; Greniuk 2005; Olejnik 1993). Without a doubt, the theological understanding is referred to when speaking of ecological sin. This is because it is not treated as a simple transgression. It is understood as an action that entails serious guilt and affects the whole world in an almost metaphysical way; it manifests some kind of “mystery of iniquity” (*mysterium iniquitatis*) that John Paul II, the philosopher and theologian pope, pointed out as part of his teaching on sin (John Paul II 1984, 19).

Given the mentioned theological origin of ecological sin and its connotations, it is difficult not to conclude that a prerequisite for the proper use of the expression “ecological sin” and understanding what it means is to look at the issue from the point of view of Catholic theology. The present text provides just such a view of this issue. Its purpose is to synthesize what ecological sin is from the perspective of Catholic moral theology. Put differently, this study is intended to help understand what ecological sin is. In turn, this understanding is seen as a way to optimize the environmental policies and public debate about it, as demonstrated by the article’s title. Ultimately, therefore, the purpose of this text is twofold.

First, it is a synthetic elaboration of the theory of ecological sin implying scientific development, especially its disciplines that deal with environmental issues. Second, the purpose of the text is to introduce clarity into environmental policy and public discourse about it. This discourse has intensified in recent times due to the observed climate change and energy crises that are increasingly accentuated. Explicitness in the statements of politicians, publicists, journalists and scientists, appears to be greatly needed. As an expert on the issue notes, the merging of politics, environmental issues and religion that has been taking place for years is an essential element of contemporary political processes (Jenkins 2021, 1–2). Therefore, issues that arise at the intersection of politics, ecology and religion need to be well-prepared and unambiguous. Such issues also include the concept of ecological sin.

The subject of this study is ecological sin. The analyses carried out concern and include it. Their purpose is to develop and present the concept of ecological sin primarily based on current catholic theological knowledge. It also includes other scientific disciplines, mainly the natural and social sciences, whose theses help understand what an optimal relationship between man and nature should look like and what their sinful deformation consists of. This is done in four steps. The first outlines the theological theory of sin in general. This content is the basis for finding and presenting the essence of ecological sin. The next step describes some of its popular manifestations. The final part is a synthetic compilation of the conclusions of the analysis.

2. Foundations: An Outline of the Theological Concept of Sin (In General)

To understand the essence of an ecological sin, it is necessary to have a general understanding of what sin is. Therefore, outlining this issue is an important part of the undertaken analyses.

For catholic moral theology, the essence of every sin is unambiguous. It constitutes a turning away from God and a disordered turning toward creatures (*peccatum est aversio a Deo et inordinata connversio ad creaturas*). In other words, we can say it is disordered, meaning against the natural order of the actant and creatures, and in this sense, it is rationally unjustified to turn against them, resulting in a turning away from God; it is rejecting God in order to deal with some creature or group of creatures in a way that would be irreconcilable with a good relationship with the Originator and Creator of all things. This understanding of sin has functioned in the Ecclesial Tradition and theology since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and is regarded as the classic definition of sin (Vidal 1994, 651–54).

Essentially, sin consists of rejecting God and His vision of the world and man, including one's happiness and duty, and taking actions to arrange the world according to one's idea, or abandoning those that achieve and perpetuate God's order. The crux here, at least to some extent, is that someone considers themselves to be more important than God; one's idea is more valuable than His. This idea, therefore, diminishes God's significance and deprives Him of His rightful place in the whole God-man-world system. Thus, a man attempts to carry out the diabolical and deceitful, also impossible to fulfil due to its incompatibility with man's nature as a creature, prompting him to try to be "like God" and decide about good and evil (Gen 3:5). Sin, therefore, constitutes an attempt, marked by selfishness and contempt for God, to rival Him, thus rejecting the conviction that God is the supreme and unsurpassed Truth and Love.

The essence of sin is the desire to become equal to God, to break the natural relationship founded on truth and love with Him consciously and voluntarily whi-

le entering into a disordered (not reflected in God's eternal strategy, that is, devoid of truth) relationship with His creatures. In other words, it is a way to exclude God from the relationship. Since man has "replaced God," God now appears to be unnecessary. Thus, the mentioned God-man-world system built on truth and love is now reduced by sin to a simple man-world system. Therefore, sin appears to be a certain "anti-creation," meaning an attempt to create a new yet irrational world order, one devoid of truth and incompatible with the nature of creatures. Thus, this altered world, due to the lack of metaphysical foundations, does not have a chance to survive (Wyróstkiewicz 2020, 28–29). Therefore, it is not uncommon for a sinner to make further attempts to keep it in existence – as the psalmist expressed poetically by stating that the abyss summons another abyss (Ps 42:8). This not only causes sins to accumulate, but even entire sinful structures arise that prevent people from functioning according to truth and love. Every sin impedes attaining integral development and happiness, even for those who are not personally involved in sinful conduct (John Paul II 1984, no. 16)

In reflecting on sin, one cannot ignore the truth that, although it has social consequences often far beyond the area of a sinner's personal life, it is always his personal act. Sin is a personal action resulting from one's choice. Of course, both reason and will can be restrained, and the choice will then not be entirely free, willed or deliberate, but it is always a particular person's action, and they bear responsibility for it, incurring guilt (Vidal 1994, 651–654; Wyróstkiewicz 2013, 52–53).

3. Analysis and Discussion: Why "Ecological" Sin?

The condition for understanding the concept of ecological sin is general knowledge of the essence of sin. The next step is to reveal his faces.

3.1 In Search of the Essence of Ecological Sin

All that has been said above applies to every sin, including ecological sin. This sin is distinguished from others by its special matter, the human-natural environment relationship in the broadest sense. It represents an attempt to bring a new order (or rather, disorder) into the world, and not only materially (at the natural level), but also how it is perceived and understood. This happens not only or primarily because man usurps the right to selfishly plunder nature's resources, not justified in any way, thus rejecting the Creator's plan for man's relationship with nature. Therefore, man finally rejects the Creator by undertaking anti-creation work in the world according to his personal idea. Ecological sin is not primarily about turning against nature but against God. Improperly treating the natural environment and abuse in this area express man's detachment from God's economy of love. Man's relationship with nature in this sense is at the heart of ecological sin, since it is its important matter, as already mentioned. Thus, this is the reason it is called ecological, because it relates to topics that ecology studies and discusses.

In this context, the fact that ecological sin is even mentioned and not, for example, natural sin, is worth highlighting. From this, it can be inferred that its subject matter should not be limited to the man-environment relationship but extended to everything that is the subject of research concerning ecological issues. Therefore, manifestations of ecological sin, in addition to the misuse of natural resources, will also include conscious and voluntary hypocrisy of data, disorderly scientific research entering the field of natural sciences and, finally, using ecological issues as tools for various kinds of profit (not only material) that are not due in justice.

This understanding is in line with the Amazon Synod's (2019) entry in the final document, during which the so-called ecological issue was one of the key topics. In it, the synodal fathers proposed to

“define ecological sin as an action or omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment. It is sin against future generations, and it is committed in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment. These are transgressions against the principles of interdependence, and they destroy networks of solidarity among creatures and violate the virtue of justice.” (Final Document of the Amazon Synod: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology 2019, 82)

It is worth noting that there is no limit to sinful interference with nature. The first perceived issue is an “ecological sinner's” inappropriate relationship with God.

Summarizing the analysis so far, we can reiterate the thesis already functioning in the subject literature that ecological sin is not limited to excessive and illogical (unjust to other people, including those who will come later) exploitation of natural resources. This sin consists in rejecting the truth about the world and man's place in it, including his duties and limitations towards nature (Wyrostkiewicz 2020, 30).

3.2 The Faces of Ecological Sin

The general theory of ecological sin presented above focused on its essence. Understanding it provides a suitable starting point for seeing the various manifestations of ecological sin. Those that appear to be the most pronounced and widespread are presented below.

3.2.1 “*Defectum*” in Caring for Nature

According to Catholic tradition, some sins are committed “by defect” (Latin: *per defectum, secundum defectum*) of some virtue or, more broadly, a corresponding presupposition of action or even as a result of a “missing” fundamental option (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, no. 1853; Olejnik 1998, 322). Such cases also occur regarding ecological sin.

Ecological sin committed *per defectum* is relatively easy to understand. It involves “having a defect,” i.e., insufficient concern for nature. It is expressed in the

insufficient, meaning man's role that is overly superficial and ineffective performed, a task assigned by the Creator. Consequently, what is involved here is the inadequate fulfilment, or even non-fulfilment, of man's role as caretaker and guardian of creation, resulting in the use of natural resources exceeding the legitimate needs of a person or group of people. However, sin always involves an action carried out by a specific person.

A manifestation of the ecological sin committed by a lack of (*per defectum*) concern for nature is a kind of "predatory" and "plundering" economy. John Paul II describes it as follows:

"In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. /.../ Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him." (John Paul II 1991, 37)

Abusing his position as ruler and legitimate exploiter of nature's resources makes the action unauthorized, meaning sinful. Instead of legitimate exploitation, there is disorder and plunder with the marks of sin.

The mentioned legitimacy of the need to use natural resources is determined by the need to satisfy man's natural pursuits. At the same time, this should not be limited to securing basic values such as life and health, but also all others that arise from man's nature. These include, for example, creating culture and civilization activities. In turn, their validity can be determined by taking into account the actual needs of man and society, their abilities and nature's abilities. Speaking of society, it is necessary to take into account not only the one that is currently functioning but also the planet's future inhabitants (Bartnik 2004, 389–391).

It is not difficult to see that a sinful action analyzed here shows that an "ecological sinner" not only does not take into account nature, but above all does not consider other people, and his selfishness appears. Thus, it can be said without exaggeration that the lack (*defectum*) of love and justice is also revealed here. Assuming after the commentator of the papal documents that love and justice are the two basic "ecological virtues" (Kyc 2022, 85–87), one concludes that it is the lack of or unjustified moderation of these virtues (*defectum*) that appears to be the unequivocal source and expression of ecological sin.

When legitimately using natural resources, i.e., not causing sin, one needs restraint and moderation (Kantyka 2019, 108–114), applying properly understood asceticism (Zadykiewicz 2002). When all of this is missing (that is, when there is a *defectum*), one can speak of the embers of ecological sin.

At this point, it is worth hinting at what will be discussed in detail when poin-

ting to other aspects of ecological sin. This concerns understanding the intergenerational solidarity mentioned earlier. It is expressed in the fact that one acts in such a way that the planet can be handed over to the next generation in such a condition that it is suitable for cultivation. In turn, this does not mean the need to leave the Earth “preserved” and untouched for successors. The call for intergenerational solidarity should not be equated with an appeal to leave it untouched (Wyrostkiewicz 2019, 212–214).

An expression of the face of ecological sin discussed here is, as already noted, using natural resources in a way that is not proportional to nature’s current “productive capacity.” At this point, the word “current” must be emphasized. Not everything that has the hallmarks of ecological sin at one time will be so at another time or place. The world is dynamic, and it includes nature’s capabilities and limitations.

Deficient knowledge (*defectum*) of the planet’s possibilities and man’s real needs results in sinful actions. Thus, simply distancing oneself from the search for truth on this subject appears to be a sinful action – an example of ecological sin. This statement confirms the thesis that the beginning of ecological sin committed *per defectum* does not misappropriate nature but resists the truth. Thus, it will not be an exaggeration to conclude that this *defectum* refers to it in the first place, and then materializes as a “missing” concern for nature founded on the absence of truth (and therefore on untruth).

3.2.2 “*Excessum*” in Caring for Nature

The face of ecological sin described above is most strongly emphasized in the literature and quasi-scientific discussions and publications. Not infrequently, the entire concept of ecological sin is reduced to these ideas. Moreover, quite often, any interference with nature is treated as a sinful activity. Such a point of view, however, cannot be reconciled with the vision of ecological sin developed by Catholic moral theology. It clearly states that not all interference with nature is sinful. On the contrary, many activities that seemingly look like ecological sin are an expression of concern for properly understood sustainable development. This, after all, is one of the basic ecological categories, and its implementation is an expression of care for the planet and implementing God’s plan (Szyszko 2020). The consequence of such a view is that a “conservation” attempt not only contributes to sin but is one of the facets of ecological sin – a sin committed by unnecessary and unjustified excessive (Latin *excessum*) concern for nature.

It was mentioned above that, according to Catholic theology, the Creator never demanded that man not use the earth and give it to future generations intact. What is more, God commanded that man use the earth by processing its resources, meaning changing it (Szymik 2017). To reject this is to reject God’s will since man implements his idea of what is “better”; this puts man in God’s place, which is the essence of sin – as mentioned in the first section of this paper. At this point, it is also worth noting that prohibiting a man from using nature’s resources harms him; it blocks man’s development.

A call to “preserve the world” is to act against people whose development is unjustly restricted. Therefore, it is an expression of a lack of love toward people – negating to affirm the human person in favour of maintaining nature’s status quo. It is also a rejection of the truth about the dynamic world, meaning one in which change is the norm, and building one’s opinions about man’s relationship to nature based on colloquial or subjective knowledge promulgated by various publicists whose activities are part of the post-truth trend, which is largely a tool for building social and political influence (Finlayson 2019, 67–69; Brahms 2020). If, on the other hand, a truly pro-environmental attitude is searching for truth in dialogue, as Pope Francis teaches (Francis 2015, 163–201; 13–16), then the activity characterized by a closure to the discussion is the opposite; it appears as an anti-environmental and even sinful attitude. Sinful here means activity resulting from excessive (*excessum*), meaning it is unsupported by truth and aims to protect nature from man, while at the same time closing oneself to other views on the relationship between man and nature. This is an action that harms both elements of this system because it harms each of their natures.

4. Conclusions and Resolutions

Environmental sin is not a novelty in reflections on human-nature relations. It has a long presence in Catholic moral theology and belongs to the basic theological categories. The term “ecological” does not change the essence of the sin. It only indicates its matter, pointing out that it is a transgression concerning the violation of just and righteous human-nature relations. At the same time, just and righteous relationships are those that allow both man and nature (all its elements understood integrally as a whole) to function in harmony with nature.

Worth emphasizing is the thesis that ecological sin is not about interfering with nature itself (which commentators not infrequently narrow it down to), but about man’s wrong approach to nature; incorrectly perceiving and treating the natural environment, both in actions that use its resources and in formulated and communicated theses on human-nature relations. Thus, it is not difficult to see that ecological sin is a reality manifesting itself in various ways.

Observations of the modern world and an analysis of the relevant literature have led to the identification of four main facets of ecological sin. These are: 1) misuse of natural resources, meaning a *defectum* in caring for nature; 2) exaggerated and unjustified restriction of nature’s use and protecting it from man, meaning an *excessum* in concern for nature.

As noted earlier, the described faces of ecological sin are part of a group of discoverable issues. This means that the list is open. Therefore, it is worth undertaking further research that will complete it.

The presented approach is expected to influence not only the development of the sciences whose subject is the natural environment or man’s relationship to it, but including the optimization of the public debate on the Anthropocene, ecological ethics and environmental policy. This is an important goal of this article.

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