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Recapitulatio (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις) as an Aspect of the Christian Ecotheology

Abstract

Ecotheology is a construct assembled from the elements of post-modernity. However, it can be applicable to the Patristics. A prominent 'eco-father' was Irenaeus of Lyon (2nd century), who developed theology of *recapitulatio* – embracing by Christ of the entire creature, in all its ontological and chronological dimensions. Irenaeus' ecotheology is Christ-centric. It features a distinct teleology – salvation of the entire world in Christ.



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'Ecotheology' is a word-form, which some scholars connect with post-modernity.¹ It indeed sounds post-modern as juxtaposing two categories, which traditionally did not occur together: theology and environment. In the combination with ecology and post-modern problematic, 'ecotheology' exceeds by far the traditional theological frameworks. In the recent studies, it flourished in the fields bordered with ethics. Its proponents, for instance, are theologians who are famous as ethicists: H. Richard Niebuhr², James Gustafson³ and others. H. Richard Niebuhr expressed the ethical dimension of the ecotheology in the following statement:

'Now every day is the day that the Lord has made; every nation is a holy people called by him into existence in its place and time and to his glory; every person is sacred, made in his image and likeness; every living thing, on earth, in the heavens, and in the waters is his creation and points in its existence toward him; the whole earth is filled with his glory; the infinity of space is his temple where all creation is summoned to silence before him. Here is the basis then not only of a transformed ethics, founded on the recognition that whatever is, is good, but of transformed piety or religion, founded on the realization that every being is holy.'⁴

¹ See Gottlieb, Roger S. 1996. "Zimmerman, Michael E. Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Post-Modernity." *Ethics* 106 (3) (January 1): 653.

² See Scoville, Judith N. 2002. "Fitting Ethics to the Land: H. Richard Niebuhr's Ethic of Responsibility and Ecotheology." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 30 (2) (January 1): 207-229.

³ See Ferré, Frederick. 1995. "A Sense of the Divine: the Natural Environment From a Theocentric Perspective by James M. Gustafson." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 16 (3) (January 1): 342-345.

⁴ Niebuhr, Helmut Richard. 1970. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper Torchbooks: 53-54.

‘Ecotheology’ is a new construct. It is interdisciplinary and reflecting concerns of modernity, in the spirit of postmodernity. Given all this, however, can we trace ‘ecotheology’ back to the theological past? Can we find its roots in the traditional theological schemata? Scholars attempted to trail ecotheology beyond the borderline of the modernity. Some, for instance, find it in the 18th century British poetry.⁵ Indeed, Alexander Pope’s vision of God loving his entire creature in equally its detail and integrity, is synoptic with the insights of the modern ecotheology. Creator, for Pope,

Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurl’d,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.⁶

Can we however attempt something more and find connections of the ecotheology with the Patristic thought? This is not as easy as it may seem at first sight. The first sight would suggest that of course, ecotheology is convertible to Patristics, because in the Fathers we can find answers to all questions, including the ones that bother modernity. A more cautious researcher would say, however, that ecology was not on the agenda of the classical world and therefore our attempts to discover ecotheology in the Patristic era would be anachronistic and not faithful to the Fathers, or at least to what they meant.

If we nevertheless avoid imposing on the Fathers modern ecological agenda, but try to carefully find in their writings the ideas, which would be in tune with insights of H. Richard Niebuhr or even Alexander Pope, we will not necessary fail.

⁵ Sitter, John. 2008. “Eighteenth-Century Ecological Poetry and Ecotheology.” *Religion & Literature* 40 (1) (January 1): 11–37.

⁶ An Essay on Man, 87-90.

Among the Fathers, I find most relevant to the modern ecotheological thought St Irenaeus of Lyon who lived between approximately 140-200.

His main contribution to the 'ecological' line of thought was the concept of what is in Latin called 'recapitulatio' or, in Greek, 'ἀνακεφαλαίωσις'. Irenaeus' starting point was the phrase from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, 'To unite (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι) all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth' (1: 10). The concept of 'recapitulatio' in Irenaeus has a broad variety of meanings. To define it in a few words, however, we could say that it primarily means the fact that Christ became the head of the entire creature and embraced all the world.

The world embraced by Christ has a complex structure. It features many dimensions. It is not only the visible world around us, which we now call nature. It is also invisible world of intelligent spirits. Humankind stands just in the midst of these two worlds. It is through humankind that Christ embraces and unites both visible and invisible worlds.

Human nature is both a focus and a mediator of Christ's recapitulating mission. God incarnated for the sake of humans. Through the humans, He brings His redemptive power to the entire world. As Irenaeus puts it, 'the entire flesh of the entire humankind' entered under the head of Christ.⁷ Divine Logos, having assumed human flesh, covered the entire humankind like by wings.⁸

Not only the world in its present situation went under the 'wings' of Christ. The world's past, present and future are also covered by the Incarnation. In the history of the world Irenaeus emphasises the history of relations of humans with God as its core. This core of the human history includes creation of the world, history of ancient Israel, Christ's birth, life, sufferings,

⁷ *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 1.2.1.13-14, see also *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 33.5-6.

⁸ See *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 11.43-44.

crucifixion, resurrection, and finally, His *Parousia*. Although these are separate and sometimes distant events, they constitute an integral core of the human history. Irenaeus calls it *oeconomia*⁹ or *πραγματεία*¹⁰. Thus, the entirety of the world covered by the head of Christ, includes the dimension of history.

All the dimensions of the creature have cores on which the Incarnation is focused. In the entirety of the touchable world, this is humankind. In the entirety of the history, this is the presence of God in the person of Christ. The activity of God is focused on these cores, but does not stop there. It reaches far beyond these cores. At the same time, it goes beyond the cores mostly through the cores.

The world 'recapitulatio' has prefix 're-' which means coming back. The idea of the diversity of the creature, which comes back to the unity with God, is dear to Irenaeus. This idea is close to the Neoplatonic concept of things that return to the unity with the One. Irenaeus modifies this idea. For him, although the entire world is called to come back to the unity, the power that attracts all the things in the world to the unity is not the oneness of the One, but Christ as God incarnated. Irenaeus, thus, shifts the unifying power of God from the oneness to the incarnation.

Therefore, theology that Irenaeus develops, is not just God-centric, it is Christ-centric, or, even more precisely, it is incarnation-centric. Incarnation-centrism suggested by Irenaeus in the second century, was accepted by the Church and became the mainstream in the theological developments through further centuries.

⁹ See *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 1.2.1.8; 1.4.1.7; 1.8.7.12; 1.8.14.8; 11.5.9; 19.3; 16.4 etc.

¹⁰ See *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 1.4.1.7; 1.5.1.15; 1.11.1.6; 11.15; 11.44; 11.48.

Irenaeus developed this kind of centrism, as it was mentioned, in response to the Neoplatonic concept of returning of all things to the One by the power of oneness. Irenaeus also responded to Gnostics, such as Basilides, Valentine, and Marcion. Their icon of Christ as a fleshless being, forced Irenaeus to focus on realism of the Incarnation. To say this, I do not mean that the Gnostics were not realists. They were. However, their realism of presence of God in Christ reduced if not excluded the realism of human presence in Christ.

The incarnational realism of Irenaeus is of a different kind. He suggests that the realism of God does not exclude the realism of human in Christ. Developing this kind of realism, Irenaeus identifies two basic questions he needs to answer: first, *what* came to the unity in Christ and second, *how* this came to the unity in Christ. Irenaeus answers the first question with the affirmation that Christ is both true God and true human. There is no irreconcilable dilemma about Christ: whether He is true God or true man. He can be both of them simultaneously. Moreover, His Godhead is truly united with His humanity, and this unity is truly realistic.

God and man who came to the unity in Christ, for Irenaeus, are not two subjects, but one and the same Christ. Irenaeus finds a Gospel-like laconic and clear formulation to show this. Christ, for him, is not two 'other' subjects (expressed by masculine genus - ἄλλος): 'Apostles did not preach that God is other (ἄλλος) from the other one (ἄλλος) who suffered and resurrected or the other one (ἄλλος) who accomplished resurrection and remained untouched by sufferings, but one and the same God and Saviour Jesus Christ who raised from the dead.'¹¹ Irenaeus, thus, introduced a new system of coordinates where he placed those realisms he wanted to emphasise in answer to the questions raised by Gnostics. The questions, what

¹¹ *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 14.1-6.

and how is united in Christ, became universal Christological matrix for the posterior Christian theology.

The answers offered by Irenaeus, were very hard to accept by a classical mind. It seems that Irenaeus purposely chooses words and images to irritate in the most annoying way minds shaped by the classical *paideia*. He certainly does not look for compromises.

To add some more pain to the bearers of the classical traditions, Irenaeus offers a different teleology. What is the ultimate purpose of 'recapitulatio'? His answer is: salvation. Thus Irenaeus introduces a strong soteriological criterion against which he measures all other theological issues. Christ is true God and true man, and the unity of Godhead and humankind in Him is true, not without purpose. This is so because it is the only possibility for the human nature to be saved: 'If not the true man won over the enemy of man, then the enemy is not truly defeated. If it is not God who granted salvation <in Christ>, then we cannot be sure that we received this salvation.'¹² The same soteriological criterion applies to recapitulation. Christ embraced the entire nature for the purpose of salvation. Salvation constitutes the only true purpose of the Incarnation. Coming of all things together in the incarnated God has the same purpose: the salvation of all things.

In conclusion, St Irenaeus gives us insights for developing our modern ecotheology. We can borrow from him a holistic approach to the entire creation. This means, for instance, that time is not excluded from it. When we speak about integrity of the creation we should include in it its past, present, and future. In the integrity of the creation, there are at least two cores that

¹² *Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 26.3-6. 'If man has not united with God, then he was unable to become incorruptible.' (*Adversus haereses* [TLG 1447] 26.7-8).

are used as mediators for expanding God's grace to the world, man as regards the world here and now, and Christ's lifetime as regards timeline. Probably our ecotheology should be incarnation-centric. At first glance, it looks like incarnation-centrism is similar to Christ-centrism. However, may be it is not? May be, incarnation-centrism is more Trinity-inclusive. If it is so, then incarnation-centrism presupposes activity not only of the Word, but also of the Father and of the Spirit. And finally, teleology of our ecotheology should be soteriological. The 'recapitulatio' of the creation in Christ is a movement to its integrity within itself and with God. The purpose of this movement is salvation. Salvation is simultaneously a precondition of the 'recapitulatio'. Regardless of the kind of relations between God and creature, man stands in the centre of these relations as their mediator and justification.