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## **FROM GARDEN TO CITY**

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### **1. Introduction: The Garden and the City**

The opening chapters of the Bible present us with the scene of a garden, as the culmination of God's creation of the world, and as the immediate prelude to the creation of humans: "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed" (Gen 2:8). The word "garden" occurs a dozen times in Gen 2 & 3. However, the last chapter of the Bible concludes with a vision of "the holy city" (Rev 22:2, 19). It is "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2). If the garden is the work of God, we might say that the city is the work of humans.

### **2. The 'Earth Creature' and the Rest of Creation**

Logos, the wisdom of God, lies at the core of all created beings: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (Jn 1:3). Hence arises Teilhard de Chardin's 'Hymn of the Universe': "But you, my God, are the inmost depths, the stability of that eternal milieu, without duration or space, in which our cosmos emerges gradually into being and grows gradually to its final completeness ..."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the life and teaching of the Logos incarnate form the criterion of right living. Thus in the Logos

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<sup>1</sup>*Hymn of the Universe*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 21.

lies the bond of unity between humans and the rest of the created world. From the beginning, the bond of humans with the rest of creation remains intimate. Firstly, man is formed "from the dust of the ground" (Gen 2:7) and to that dust he does return (Gen 3:19). In this sense, he carries nature with him and is an 'earth creature', so much so, that his final destiny is to be reunited with matter in the resurrection. Vatican II states: "Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world. Thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator" (GS 14). Though belief in the resurrection is foreign to Hinduism, nevertheless the idea of being earth creatures is also expressed in Hindu anthropology, through the concept of the *pancha mahābhuta* or "five great elements" which make up all creation, including the human body: earth, water, fire, air/wind, ether/void; early ayurveda is based on the physics of the five elements.

In the Bible, man and woman share the same fate as other creatures. The flood threatens to destroy the rest of creation, together with humans. The reason for this is the fact that "the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen 6:11). Divine intervention makes sure that together with humans, all other creatures and plants survive. God makes a covenant, not only with Noah and his descendants, but also "with every living creature that is with you" (Gen 9:10). In fact it is a "covenant between me and the earth" (Gen 9:13). Humans share in this covenant, so that Benedict XVI can also speak of the "covenant between human beings and the environment."<sup>2</sup> The sign of these "everlasting covenants" (Sir 44:18) is a familiar sign of nature: the rainbow. At the time of creation, humans are told that they are to master the earth, so that the untamed land may serve them; they are given "dominion" over every living thing (Gen 1:28), not as absolute lords but as collaborators of God and stewards of creation (Col 1:15 ff).<sup>3</sup> They are called to participate in the divine governance of creation. It is this stewardship which has been neglected in the past. For humans are equally creatures of God and must respect the right order established by God. It is God who brings every bird and animal to the man to name them, so as to express his

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<sup>2</sup>Message for the 2008 World Day of Peace, N. 7: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace_en.html)

<sup>3</sup>In Islam, man is a caliph on behalf of Allah (*khalifat-Allah*), who is the only true owner of anything.

God-given mastery over them (Gen 2:19-20). The NJBC comments: "Humans nonetheless are to respect the environment; they are not to kill for food but are to treat all life with respect ... there will be no bloodshed."<sup>4</sup> If this prohibition is modified after the flood (Gen 9:2-3), it is because of humans' "hardness of heart" (*sklérokardía*), which also made allowance for divorce: "but from the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8; Mk 10:5).<sup>5</sup> The earth is gifted to humans as their common **house**, which they must look after and in which they must live in communion with one another. In fact the word "ecology" is derived from the Greek word "*oikos*," meaning house.

### 3. Religion, Cosmos and Society

Being so much an earth creature, it is not surprising that humans' approach to God is closely tied to nature. Human life is so much immersed in the cyclic pattern of nature, that life is interpreted in terms of the iron law of the seemingly endless cycle of death and (re)birth, which is observed in nature. Through cosmic revelation people are able to attain a profound religious sense: "From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too" (NA 2). And so religious feasts are connected with the solar and lunar cycles. At the core of the Jewish liturgical year were the feasts of Unleavened Bread, of Weeks and of Tents; these were agricultural feasts. Christmas corresponds with the winter solstice. Elements of nature, such as water, fire, oil enter into the religious rites. Jesus saw in nature suitable similes for spiritual realities; he gives examples of fields and vineyards, sowing and harvesting, wind and clouds, fig trees, lilies and the mustard seed. Christian revelation calls humans to transcend their binding to nature, through personal decision and encounter with God in history. Humans must find God, not only in nature but also in history, not only in the garden but also in the city.

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<sup>4</sup>New Jerome Biblical Commentary (NJBC), TPI, Bangalore, 1991: comment on Gen 1:28.

<sup>5</sup>C. Spicq explains the term *sklérokardía*: "a stiff or hard heart resists divine impulses, refuses to follow that path that God wants it to follow. It is not only closed and insensitive, but disobedient." *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994, V.3.

Unlike other creatures, human beings grow from their connection with nature, through intelligent interaction, towards their true historical existence and destiny. They are being drawn willy-nilly into a world-wide web of relationships. This is seen in the growth from smaller groupings to ever larger ones: from tribal and caste life towards national and international solidarity, and ultimately to the realization of the one humanity. Quite aptly, therefore, the Bible opens with the vista of a "garden" and ends with a vision of "the holy city."

Humans are bestowed a dignity which far surpasses that of all other earth creatures: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1:27). They are not God, but God's image. What it means to behave as God's image and viceroy is exemplified in Jesus, who is the image of God par excellence (Col 1:15; Hb 1:3). We are called to be conformed to him, who described his purpose as seeking "to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 5:30). Our liberty is to be exercised in service of God's plan for creation. Besides, humans are created in relationship, "male and female he created them," made for solidarity, sharing and mutual accountability. They share in God's rule and enjoy intelligence for this purpose. But if they fail in their stewardship by giving in to pride, greed and selfishness, they will bring disaster upon themselves and drag creation with them. Hence the whole creation waits with eager longing to be "set free from its bondage to decay" and share in the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:19-23). We "groan" for our full liberation, and creation "con-groans" (Greek: συνστενάζει) with us; our groaning coincides. Before us "lies the path to freedom or to slavery, to progress or retreat, to brotherhood or hatred" (GS 9). It is important to recognize, as Pope John Paul II notes, that the earth "has its own requisites and a prior God-purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray."<sup>6</sup>

Herein lies the central issue and the crux of the matter. The temptation of humans is to play God and try to impose their own order, or sadly disorder, upon the world: "in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). Satan dangles before man and woman the prospect of "being like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). The temptation to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good

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<sup>6</sup>Encyclical Letter, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, N. 37.

and evil is the temptation to seek "a mastery of life and an autonomy that is inappropriate to the earth creature, created from dust."<sup>7</sup> The exaltation of absolute autonomy is personified as "the rebellion ... and the lawless one... he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God" (2 Thes 2:3-4). The first step in humility is to recognise that we only *discover* the laws of nature, already laid down by God and not by us. Teilhard de Chardin reminds us: "The world travails, not to bring forth from within itself some supreme reality, but to find its consummation through a union with a pre-existent Being."<sup>8</sup> This brings up the whole question of humans' relation to nature or the environment.

#### 4. Respect for Creation

Humanity has passed from a magical, through a metaphysical to a scientific attitude to the cosmos. In the past, 'secondary causes' were ignored in attributing the weather and illness to direct interventions of God. Christianity demythologized the world and asserted human dominion over it (Gen 1:26, 28). This released forces of control, through science and technology. Today we have a much greater control over nature and can even transform it. We have succeeded in increasing the human life-span. The contemplation of the beauty of the world has given way to consideration of how nature can be conquered. This attitude is sometimes carried over to relationships among humans, when they are instrumentalized as mere means to suit the interests of a few.

In Hinduism, the order which makes life and the universe possible is expressed by the fundamental concepts of *rta* or *dharma*. This is the cosmic order which unites and maintains the ethical and physical worlds. For this reason, the key to peace and happiness lies in **harmony** of humans among themselves and with God and nature. The development of ayurveda and yoga has been consonant with this outlook.

Through their inventions and interventions in nature, humans open up a future which is no less unforeseeable and uncontrollable than before. Present or future possibilities include various forms of genetic engineering, cloning, chimeras, cyborgs, and bio-technology. Areas of grave concern remain: water and air pollution, deforestation, loss of

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<sup>7</sup>NJBC: comment on Gen 2:9.

<sup>8</sup>Hymn of the Universe, 29-30.

bio-diversity, climate changes, pesticides and health. The nuclear tragedy of Chernobyl and the gas tragedy of Bhopal illustrated the new cruelties or punishment which humans may be imposing on future generations; not to mention the spread of AIDS and various forms of cancer. If humans tyrannize nature, it will only provoke a rebellion on the part of nature. Hence the question arises, should we do all that technology makes it possible for us to do? How far may man/woman remake themselves? What values should guide all that we are capable of doing? Science and technology can give us the means to reach a specific goal, but they cannot tell us what the right ends are. As the International Theological Commission put it: "What is technically possible is not necessarily also reasonable or ethical."<sup>9</sup> This is the point at which divine revelation can help, with its transcendent perspectives on humankind and the universe. Humans must make their decisions wisely, taking account of the totality of reality.

A development which is driven by greed, profit for the few and unbridled search for luxury, can only lead to the destruction of the environment and ultimately of humans themselves.<sup>10</sup> Sustainable development takes account of environmental preservation. It is unfortunate, that "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."<sup>11</sup> People are generating toxic waste in quantities which the earth cannot cope with, in order to satisfy their desires, which sometimes exceed their needs. We are familiar with the phenomenon of global warming, its causes and its fatal consequences. It is a difficult lesson and a bitter pill to swallow, that 'less can be more'! Too rich a diet and lack of exercise can lead to sundry forms of heart ailments. An increase of vehicles has been accompanied by an increase of road accidents and of air pollution, leading to an assortment of bronchial diseases and cancer. Today's faster pace of life takes its toll of mental and physical health. It is plain, that "progress" cannot be identified with uninhibited industrial development. Standard of living must be distinguished from quality

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<sup>9</sup>"Communion and Stewardship" (2004), N. 61: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040723\\_communion-stewardship\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html)

<sup>10</sup>In Buddhism, the root cause of all suffering is *tr̥sna*, or thirst for pleasures and craving after objects of the senses, among other things.

<sup>11</sup>John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, N. 37.

of life; growth should be a function of the quality of life, and not vice-versa. We have to examine our life-style, to make sure it is marked by sobriety and solidarity.

### **5. Rise of the City**

The same human dignity which enables humans to gain an ever increasing mastery of nature, also enables them to create the **city**. Humankind begins in the garden but ends in the city. The city is the result of historical forces, which is the intelligent interaction of humans. In the past, urbanisation took place at a very slow pace; the chief cities of Europe took centuries, even millennia to form. Today more than half the world's population lives in urban zones and that process is advancing at a fast pace. More than 2/3rd of the population of some countries is urbanised. In 1950 there were only 6 cities counting 5 million inhabitants and above. Today, there are at least ten times that number of cities! Forty-five of these are situated in developing countries (29 in Asia alone). By 2020 Mumbai is expected to be the world's biggest city after Tokyo. It is estimated that 30% Indians live in cities and that five of the world's twenty most densely populated cities are in India.

During millennia, cities and towns have always played a leading role in the culture of nations: Mohenjo Daro, the Shang city at Chengchow, Tenochtitlan (Aztec city in Mexico), Athens, Rome. Together with language, the city is among the best achievements of human culture, though it has its shadows. On the one hand, the city offers freedom, economic advance, social mobility and extraordinary possibilities of development. Like nature, the city too can be a sphere in which to find God. Thus Paul, with his urban upbringing, conjures images of athletic competitions, of grammar and phonetics, of music and instruments; of architects, tutors, letters of recommendation, mirrors, perfumes and citizenship. On the other hand the city can give rise to individualism and competition, loss of solidarity, a feeling of rootlessness, isolation and solitude (the 'solitary crowd'); it can impoverish human and family relationships and provoke the break-up of the family. All this leads to an increase in crime and in psychological illnesses. For this reason, the Gospel begins very realistically, not with the beauty of creation but with Jesus who "will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). As Kabir put it: "A settled town or city may provide a fine life with pleasures at every turn; but if it lacks friends of God, I regard it as a desert" (Sakhi 4.4). The

challenge is to preserve human values (love, trust, pity, friendly affection) and ensure the security and integration of the citizens in a humanised milieu of justice and righteousness.

The development of the city must be placed in the context of the phenomenon of 'globalization', of which we are so acutely aware today. Although the process may be said to have begun centuries ago, with the growing interaction of peoples among themselves, it has accelerated with unprecedented speed in modern times. This interaction is marked by quick communications across all boundaries, by international organizations and by interdependent economies on a world scale, so that it is customary to refer to our 'global village'. Vatican II drew attention to this reality: "Today the bonds of mutual dependence become increasingly close between all citizens and all the peoples of the world ... Although the world of today has a very vivid sense of its unity and of how one person depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces" (GS 4; 84; also 77). This is the result, not of cosmic, but of historical forces. Here in the realm of history, so proper to the human person, God encounters human beings, to lead them to their final goal.

## **6. City of Man or City of God?**

The same attitude which is expected of humans towards nature is also required in their mutual interactions, namely the attitude of service which imbues stewardship. Stewardship respects the right order which must exist in nature and in society. St. Augustine develops this theme, with regard to society, in his book *The City of God*. He sees humanity divided into two cities governed by two laws which are contrary to each other: "...two societies have issued from two kinds of love. Worldly society has flowered from a selfish love which dared to despise even God, whereas the communion of saints is rooted in a love of God that is ready to trample on self. In a word, this latter relies on the Lord, whereas the other boasts that it can get along by itself... In the city of the world both the rulers themselves and the people they dominate are dominated by the lust for domination; whereas in the City of God all citizens serve one another in charity, whether they serve by the responsibilities of office or by the duties of obedience" (Bk 15, ch. 28). The two cities, earthly and heavenly, are at present inextricably intermingled, one with the other (Bk 11, ch. 1). The peace that reigns in the city of God is a "tranquillity

that comes of order" (*tranquillitas ordinis*). It is "an arrangement of like and unlike things whereby each of them is disposed in its proper place" (Bk 19, ch. 13). The symbolic capitals of the two cities are, in Biblical terms, 'Babylon', "the city of chaos" (Is 24:10) and "wickedness" (Zech 5:8), a city which is arrogant, proud (Jer 50:29-32; Is 14:13 ff) and doomed to perdition (Rev 18:1-8). The capital of the city of God is 'Jerusalem', "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22), "the wife of the Lamb" (Rev 21:9). These two cities are arrayed opposite each other (Gal 4:26; Rev 21). This is the drama which is described in the Book of Revelation. We do not know how or when God will bring about the "new heavens and new earth" (2 Pt 3:13). However, it will not be another world, but a new ordering of this created world, which will be changed into a new (or renewed) world.

All this does not dispel the looming tragedy, expressed in a composition by an unknown author, which mimics the account of creation and whose last verse reads so: "And man finally said ... Let us create God in our image. Let some other god compete with us. Let us say that God thinks - as we think; hates - as we hate; and kills - as we kill. And there was no morning and no evening on the second day before the end. On the LAST day there was a great noise on the face of the earth. Fire consumed the beautiful globe, and there was - SILENCE. The blackened earth now rested to worship the one true God. And God saw all that man had done. And in silence, over the smouldering ruins HE WEPT."

### Summary

The human link with nature, through the body, is intimate and indispensable. Nature, and indeed the cosmos, men and women, form a single whole. For this reason, the Bible portrays human life as beginning in the garden. The whole of reality has a "dharma", which humans can only discover and must respect. If they wish to do their own thing, without reference to God, they will perish: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). In keeping with their peculiar dignity, created in the image and likeness of God, men and women develop towards their historical destiny which is played out in the city. The city which they make is meant to be an anticipation of the heavenly Jerusalem, a city "of truth and life ... of holiness and grace ...

of justice, love and peace.”<sup>12</sup> It is the “Kingdom of God” which Jesus announced in his preaching and confirmed through his death and resurrection. Unfortunately the greed, pride and wickedness of humans gives rise to another city, which is in perpetual opposition to the City of God. We therefore long for the day when God will create “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev 21:1). ‘Babylon’ too will pass away, to give way to “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). All this will be both the work of God and the crowning and fulfilment of imperfect human striving to develop the world, with respect for God’s law.

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<sup>12</sup>From the Preface of the Mass of Christ the King.