

A CHRISTIAN CRITICISM OF THE SOCIETY OF GROWTH

It is accurate to describe the degrowth movement as a “galaxy” (Flipo, 2007): its criticism of growth, as well as its practical way to create a transition and live out a sober life, is vast, rich and diverse. Yet, one can adopt Serge Latouche’s broad distinction between authors who first and foremost base their discourse on the *ecological* crisis on the one hand, arguing that the society of growth is unsustainable, and those who articulate a *culturalist* critic on the other, arguing that it is undesirable (Latouche, 2006). Those are, according to him, the two sources of degrowth.

Latouche belongs to the culturalist stream. Using two concepts elaborated by the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, he indeed analyses and criticizes the modern western “social imaginary significations” – the representations, norms and values which a society carries and which strengthen it in return –, that is to say the “social imaginary” of the society of growth (Castoriadis, 1975). Namely, the human being is far from the true *Homo œconomicus*. His relationship to nature cannot be based on a right to dominate and exploit. The goal of life is not to search for well-being or happiness through ever-increased productions and consumptions. Society cannot be reduced to the interplay of each and everyone’s sheer self-interest. And this interplay does not lead society to the realization of the common good thanks to an invisible hand.

The culturalist critique exemplified by Latouche questions Christian theology. Indeed, based on its own sources, should Christian theology not oppose the western modern social imaginary? Do its representations of the human being, of its relationship to nature, of society, of happiness, of life, not contradict the dominant social imaginary? The question is all the more relevant as some have underlined in famous publications the role the Christian faith has played in creating this social imaginary. The most important texts in that regard are Max Weber’s *The Protestant’s Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905) and Lynn White Jr.’s article in *Science* entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (White, 1967).

This question demands an inquiry in several directions. The choice has been made to focus on two of them in this short paper. They correspond to the authors mentioned before: the question of the relationship of humans to nature; the question of the importance of possessions and wealth. In each case, the presentation compares recent theological research and results to the current corresponding social imaginary significations: the theology of creation faces the anthropocentric view of man ruling nature; the evangelical theology of sobriety faces the materialistic understanding of life.

Since the publication of White's article, much exegetical and theological work has been done. Scholars have examined the biblical testimony closely – especially the first two chapters in Genesis –, and have articulated a renewed understanding of humankind's existence and of its relationship to nature. The first important theological statement is that the whole world is God's creation (Gn 1:1-2:25). We are part of creation and as such creatures ourselves. In other words, there is an ontological distance between Him and us; we are no gods. From this derives that we should not behave like we own creation. The true owner of the world is God himself. However, the Bible indicates that we have been created in God's image, which makes us extra-ordinary. We do have a special status among creation. We therefore enter into a special relationship towards it, and it is expressed by four action verbs: to dominate (כבש) and to subdue (הרר) (Gn 1:28), to cultivate (עבד) and to guard (שמר) (Gn 2:15). The paper presents the main exegetical and philological arguments showing that those verbs cannot be interpreted the way they have been throughout history, as a licence to rule and exploit. According to ecotheologians, they signify on the contrary that we have to use creation in a respectful and sustainable way. God wants us to be the good stewards of his good creation, not its gravedigger. In the end, Christian theology articulates an anthropocentrism *éclairé*.

Since Weber's influential book, there has been much debate about the role religion plays in relationship with the economy and economic development (see for instance Besnard, 1970). On the theological level, studying the Scriptures one faces their rich teaching and thoughts about possessions and wealth. One also confronts its diversity which on some points houses tensions and even contradictions. From this material, six statements have been extracted and are presented. The first important point is that material goods are a good gift from God to his creatures. However, as surely as goods are a legitimate part of our lives, accumulating them is not safe, as wealth can draw us away from God. That is why the Bible time and again warns the reader against wealth (e.g. Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). Facing the danger of wealth, a disciple may adopt two different attitudes. The first is radical, as it demands one to sell all of one's goods, to give the money to the poor and to follow Jesus on the road (e.g. Mk 10:17-27 and pars.). The second is softer, as it asks one to share one's wealth and to be just with the poor (e.g. Mk 10:17-31 and pars.). Both attitudes consider that giving one's total wealth or one's surplus makes one rich in the eyes of God (Lk 12:21) and constitutes a treasure in heaven (Mt 6:20-21; Lk 12:33-34). Finally, the paper mentions two parables which may say the contrary of the rest of the biblical testimony: the parallel parables of the pounds (Lk 19:11-27) and the talents (Mt 25:14-30). In the end, Christian theology articulates an evangelical theology of sobriety and sharing.

Through those two theological *loci*, this short paper sets milestones towards a Christian “*objection de croissance*”, or a Christian criticism of the society of growth. It argues that Christian theology *does* contradict the productivist social imaginary on two of its most fundamental points. That is why it compels Christian believers to a resistance on the imaginary level, both in the way they look at creation around them and the way the economy threatens it, and in the way they consider earthly goods and richness. This mental – one could even say spiritual – resistance is the first and necessary step towards a day to day concrete resistance, not to speak of a complete change of our growth-based system. Here, we join Serge Latouche’s position, who considers “re-evaluation”, i.e. the change of social imaginary, as the prime step towards a society of “frugal abundance” (Latouche, 2011). Atheist or agnostic partisans of degrowth experiment the very same phase, even though they go through it on different grounds.

It is estimated that there are about 2 billion Christians all around the world. There is no doubt faith could be a powerful lever to convert people’s mentality, and set mankind on the course towards a sustainable and desirable future.

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