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INTEGRAL ECOLOGY AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM:  
JOHN MILBANK'S ECOLOGICAL PERSONALISM\*

Climate change is ostensibly becoming the most pressing problem of our times. Since Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer declared the arrival of the Anthropocene in 2000,<sup>1</sup> we have observed growing acceptance of pro-ecological postulates. The current scientific consensus states that humans are the predominant geological force and that climate change is anthropogenic in nature.<sup>2</sup> Despite the efforts of climate change denialists,<sup>3</sup> it appears that the problem of the scale of man's impact on the environment and its related threats is slowly taking root in the collective consciousness. The term Anthropocene itself has joined our lexicon and now impels us to change our thinking on the relationship between humanity and the environment. However, we have yet to reach the point where we can speak of a breakthrough in environmental policy. Despite the diagnosis and the ever-growing popularity of pro-environmental solutions, we are still unable to mobilise toward embracing major changes in our practices. As Ewa Bińczyk observes, we live in an age of apathy—though aware of the impending catastrophe, we are

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\* The article was prepared as part of the research project number 2018/29/N/HS1/02127 financed by the National Science Center, Poland; translated from Polish by Szymon Włoch. The author would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable comments.

<sup>1</sup> Paul J. CRUTZEN and Eugene F. STOERMER, "The 'Anthropocene'," *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.

<sup>2</sup> INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE, *Climate Change: Synthesis Report*, ed. Core Writing Team, Rajendra K. Pachauri, and Leo Meyer (Geneva: IPCC, 2014), accessed April 20, 2021, [http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR\\_AR5\\_FINAL\\_full\\_wcover.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full_wcover.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Naomi ORESKES and Erik M. CONWAY, *Merchants of Doubts. How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Press: New York, 2010).

unable to take action or to avoid it.<sup>4</sup> John Milbank's writings provide us with the argument that this apathy is no coincidence. He argues that modern environmental thinking fails to see the causes of the current crisis, which must be sought in ontology and anthropology.

It is easy to get the impression that environmental issues do not play a central role in Milbank's theological project. Despite the author's broad range of interests, remarks relating to environmentalism have remained marginal in his output. In fact, the sole paper of Milbank's to directly address the subject is "Out of the Greenhouse,"<sup>5</sup> published in 1993. In recent years, however, we can see some growth in his interest in environmental issues.<sup>6</sup> The leader of Radical Orthodoxy describes his stance as "ecological personalism."<sup>7</sup> This stance is, however, not novel but rather stems from a number of more general theological postulates covered in his body of work.

Below, I attempt to point out the major elements of ecological personalism, starting with the concept of integral ecology, which appeared in several contexts since the 1990s and was popularised by Pope Francis.<sup>8</sup> It seems to fit well with Milbank's integralist approach based on criticism of the idea of pure nature. This will allow us to see integral ecology as opposite to secular ecology. Next, I will examine Milbank's fourfold anthropology and its consequences with respect to ecology. The kenotic anthropocentrism emerging from it will then be compared with the anthropocentric concepts of Clive Hamilton and Bruno Latour. This comparison will make it easier for us to see the main features as well as potential weaknesses of Milbank's position.

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<sup>4</sup> Ewa BIŃCZYK, "The Most Unique Discussion of the 21st Century? The Debate on the Anthropocene Pictured in Seven Points," *The Anthropocene Review* 6, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019619848215>; Ewa BIŃCZYK, *Epoka człowieka: Retoryka i marazm Antropocenu* (Warsaw: PWN, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> John MILBANK, "Out of the Greenhouse," in IDEM, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 257–67.

<sup>6</sup> Milbank gave several lectures dealing with environmental issues: in Hong Kong as part of The McDonald Faith and Global Engagement Distinguished Lecture Series (2018) and in Kraków, Poland, as part of the conferences *Creatio Continua* (2018, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> John MILBANK, "Zarys personalizmu ekologicznego i ekologii personalistycznej," *The Jagiellonian Club*, Nov. 10, 2019, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2019/11/10/zarys-personalizmu-ekologicznego-i-ekologii-personalistycznej>.

<sup>8</sup> The most important sources of integral ecology include works by Thomas Berry, Leonardo Boff, and Ken Wilber; see also: Sam MICKEY, *On the Verge of a Planetary Civilization: A Philosophy of Integral Ecology* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014); Sean ESBJÖRN-HARGENS and Michael E. ZIMMERMAN, *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Boston: Integral Books, 2011).

## INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis indicates that what we need today is an integral approach to ecology.<sup>9</sup> In searching for a solution to the climate crisis, we must consider its social, economic and cultural aspects and not limit ourselves to seeking technological solutions alone. The environmental discourse cannot unfold solely within the natural science community but must also be open to input from social scientists, as well as philosophers, theologians, politicians, artists, and activists. The integrity of this approach rests on recognising that everything is interrelated.<sup>10</sup> This is also how Timothy Morton defines ecological thought, as he underscores its wide reach embracing the whole human coexistence with non-humans.<sup>11</sup> As it seems, however, Christian integral ecology demands more than that. Acknowledging interdependence alone will not show us the way to change. As Bronislaw Szerszynski argues, ecology is an answer to the question of how to act but not necessarily to the question of what exactly we must do.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it is not able to provide an objective ethical or political framework.

When it comes to Catholic thought, the notion of integrity played an important role in the twentieth-century theological debate and goes far beyond merely recognising the deep relations between all things. Following a distinction made by Milbank,<sup>13</sup> we can differentiate between integrism, which posits that social order should be founded on Catholicism, and integralism, which stresses the unity of nature and divinity. Within integralism, the English theologian identifies the French school, chiefly propagated by Henry de Lubac, and the German school, represented by Karl Rahner. Milbank believes we ought to follow the example of de Lubac, who categorically rejects the notion of pure nature and puts the theological perspective front and centre. Milbank's take on integralism also accuses Rahner's perspective of "natu-

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<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015) (Vatican City: LEV, 2015), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, §139.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy MORTON, *Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Bronislaw SZERSZYNSKI, "On Knowing What to Do: Environmentalism and the Modern Problematic," in *Risk, Environment And Modernity: Towards A New Ecology*, ed. Scott Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 104–37; MILBANK, "Out of the Greenhouse."

<sup>13</sup> John MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 206–56.

ralising the supernatural,” of excessive concessions to secularism, and of divesting the notion of divine grace of all concrete meaning.<sup>14</sup>

It is Milbank’s belief that the idea of pure nature is one of the leading reasons behind the departure from an integral vision of the world. The separation of nature and divine grace made it possible to create a secular space in which various aspects of social life may be contemplated outside of the theological context. He argues that secular thinking leads to a dangerous reductionism. In such circumstances, power, authority and domination and not the common good become the subject of “pure politics.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, “pure ecology” would perceive man as nothing more than an animal that should be subordinate to the equilibrium of the ecosystem. For this reason, Milbank claims, theology ought not to conform to the findings of secular science but return to its role as metadiscourse which positions all other discourses.<sup>16</sup> Instead of conforming to the warnings of Anthropocene researchers, Milbank rejects the secular approach to dealing with the climate crisis.

In this perspective, integral ecology takes on a considerably deeper meaning. As a theological perspective, it defines the interpretational framework of the debate on the environment and forces us to rethink environmental issues in the broader context of Christian faith. It follows that we cannot simply focus on technological solutions or even on a political revolution, but we need an ecological conversion that will change our whole way of thinking.<sup>17</sup> Since harming the Earth is a sin against God’s creation, we should seek reconciliation and learn how to participate in His work by taking care of our environment.

#### BEYOND SECULAR NATURE

Integral ecology understood as such forces us to question the very concept of nature, which has become a burden in present-day ecological reflec-

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<sup>14</sup> Steven SHAKESPEARE, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 14–15; for criticism of Milbank’s position see Bernard MULCAHY, *Aquinas’s Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henri de Lubac: Not Everything Is Grace* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> John MILBANK, *The Suspended Middle: Henri Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 22–23.

<sup>16</sup> See MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> JOHN PAUL II, General Audience (January 17, 2001), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010117.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html); FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*.

tion.<sup>18</sup> As numerous authors point out, our concept of nature is a historical construct that arose over time as a result of ideological, religious, social, political and technological transformations.<sup>19</sup> Szerszynski identifies several sources of our contemporary concept of the environment: the Protestant transfiguration of the sacred, the Enlightenment's equation of nature with reason, the Romantic idea of nature as a moral source, and Eastern religions' sacralisation of nature, among others. Of significance is the fact that, in his opinion, we always understand nature in religious terms, even if it is secularized.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, "the environment" is in fact a theological concept but, as Milbank would say, heterodox and potentially harmful one.

According to Bruno Latour, modernity is founded on the paradoxical understanding of nature as both immanent and transcendent.<sup>21</sup> We construct nature in laboratories but we are powerless against its laws. Consequently, we attempt to control nature with tools offered by science and technology while still relying on it as an external source of legitimacy. Integral ecology tells us to abandon the resulting metaphors of the conquest of nature or else a return to nature because they are mired in modern paradoxes.

As Milbank argues, seeking value in immanent nature is destined to result in failure and is dangerous with its consequences. This is because nature itself tells us nothing. Natural competition, overpopulation and the finite supply of resources are not an objective state of nature but rather concepts spawned by modern politics and economics. Likewise, neither social Darwinism nor the ethics of respect for life are dictated by nature, and aspirations toward maximal sustainable development may go hand in hand with a dangerous utilitarianism. Milbank believes secular conceptions such as this can lead to ecofascism, in which everything is subordinated to ecological calculation and technological control.<sup>22</sup> In his opinion, in order to avoid these dangers, it is necessary to return to the proper understanding of the relationship between man and nature. Man must be acknowledged as a part of nature and not as an element of the distinct realm of culture. After all, ecological problems are ultimately human problems. Only man is capable of

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<sup>18</sup> See Timothy MORTON, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> See Phil MACNAGHTEN and John URRY, *Contested Natures* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Bronislaw SZERSZYNSKI, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), xi.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 32.

<sup>22</sup> MILBANK, "Out of the Greenhouse," 262.

perceiving the value of life and taking responsibility for it. For this reason, to understand the sources of the modern environmental crisis necessitates a return to fundamental ontological and anthropological conclusions.

#### KENOTIC ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In calling his stance ecological personalism, Milbank underscores the role of man as a person in the context of the environmental debate. As Anthropocene researchers stress the increasing scale of man's impact on the planet, the anthropocentric approach is marginalised in social science and the humanities, and even seen as the root of the problem. Milbank emphatically rejects such post-humanist perspectives and embraces anthropology, which preserves man's central role, doing so while also avoiding certain pitfalls associated with this. Man is perceived here as a transorganic being, which means that, while belonging to nature, he also paradoxically transcends it. This is due to four aspects of human nature: rationality, sociality, creativity, and natural orientation to transcendence. In this manner, Milbank leans on the traditional understanding of man as *animal rationale*, *zoon politikon*, and *homo faber*, as well as on the Pascalian *Bête-Ânge*.<sup>23</sup>

Espousing the understanding of man as a rational animal, Milbank stresses that the animal element and the rational element must not be seen as mutually exclusive. Man is rational in his animality, not in spite of it.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it was only Descartes who rejected the integrity of this approach when he identified the subject with *res cogitans* and not *res extensa*.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, he detached man from his animal dimension. The body was thus understood as a machine controlled by the mind and not an integral component of the person, as it was in the traditional Christian understanding.<sup>26</sup> This objectification of the body brought with it the objectification of the natural environment, which was also mechanised and divested of its spiritual dimension.

Importantly, Milbank does not identify Cartesian dualism of the soul and body as the main reason for our instrumental attitude toward the environ-

<sup>23</sup> John MILBANK, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 135.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–41.

<sup>25</sup> René DESCARTES, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>26</sup> See Thomas AQUINAS, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Book 2, *Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (New York: Image Books, 1956), chap. 68, pp. 203–7; DESCARTES, *Meditations*, 60.

ment. Instead, he sees in it the consequences of broader shifts taking place in the area of interpersonal relations. In his opinion, modernity ushered in a radical simplification of social order. Tradition, hierarchy and deep interdependence were replaced by a “simple space” in which only the autonomous individual and the sovereign state are recognised.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, losing their significance were the various mediative organisations—guilds, religious societies and universities—as power became consolidated in the state and the market. Milbank argues we ought to strive toward a reinstatement of the “complex space” in which emphasis is placed in distribution, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the strong role of mediative organisations. By extension, opposing the dualism of the soul and body will not suffice to make our politics more sensitive to environmental issues. Instead, we must fundamentally rethink the shape of interpersonal relations in our societies.

This leads us to the second element of Milbank’s anthropology: the concept of social animal, dating as far back as Aristotle. The Stagirite believed that the community takes priority over the individual and that every human is innately made for life in a community. What differentiates man from other social animals is his ability to speak.<sup>28</sup> It is this ability that makes man a political animal in the fullest sense, one that strives for justice. This image was discarded in modernity when Thomas Hobbes proposed his vision of an asocial individual, for whom being with other people is a source of misery.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, truly social and political thinking based on reciprocity was superseded by the conviction that only fear can force people to work together and guarantee social order.

The liberal belief in the inevitable conflict between people being deterred only by the sovereign state and regulated by the mechanisms of the market constitutes one of the founding principles of the modern socio-economic system. For this reason, many authors seek solutions to the climate crisis in individual behavioural changes like the adoption of ethical consumerism or in increased control by the national state. This is well illustrated by the example of Naomi Oreskes’ and Erik M. Conway’s book *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.<sup>30</sup> The authors imagine an ecological

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<sup>27</sup> John MILBANK, “On Complex Space,” in IDEM, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 268–92.

<sup>28</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1253a, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas HOBBS, *Leviathan* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 75.

<sup>30</sup> Naomi ORESKES and Erik M. CONWAY, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

crisis situation to which strong central authority is the best response and in which individual scientific discoveries represent the greatest hope of salvation. While this is a work of literary fiction, envisioned as a critique of neoliberalism, it is clearly evident that the solutions presented therein arise out of the liberal *status quo*. As Milbank argues, however, recovery from the crisis cannot be sought in expanding the power of the state but just the opposite—in the distribution of power and the reinstatement of truly political societies functioning in a complex space. He also states that we must additionally provide a positive programme that can motivate people more effectively than can the fear of annihilation at the core of the catastrophic narrative.

For this to be possible, we must alter our thinking regarding man in the other two aspects as well. Milbank calls the concept of *homo faber* the joker in the pack of his genealogies because it is what makes his vision more than just a nostalgic return to pre-modern thinking.<sup>31</sup> It was only in modern times that the emphasis shifted to human creativity, which expresses itself in the historical, cultural and linguistic nature of humanity. As the English theologian stresses, we cannot perceive reality as something extra-lingual, construed within the subject according to a priori cognitive categories. What we need instead is a realistic constructivist model on the basis of which the verity of external reality can be guaranteed and its lingual character underscored.<sup>32</sup> Milbank calls this approach metanarrative realism<sup>33</sup> which departs from the objectivist ambitions of classical representationism but does not fall into reductionist social constructivism or textualism, in which reality possesses a textual character only. In a nutshell, though the reality is constructed and our cognition is laden with narratives, one should not conclude that everything is *only* a construct or *only* a narrative.

In this, Milbank remains under the influence of Giambattista Vico and his principle of *verum-factum* as a pair of transcendentals.<sup>34</sup> Since the true and the made are convertible, theory and practice are always inextricably connected. In light of this, it is not correct to assume that the course of action in environmental issues is always obvious and that we must only adjust our theories in order to mobilise people toward specific practices. The problem lies in the fact that we do not know what to do and that we must rethink our

<sup>31</sup> MILBANK, *Beyond Secular Order*, 208.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory*, 384–91.

<sup>34</sup> MILBANK, *Beyond Secular Order*, 191, 207; John MILBANK, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668–1744*, Part 1, *The Early Metaphysics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 77–116.



entire cultural narrative to be able to break free from apathy. Even if we were able to solve the most exigent issues—to create a low-emission economy or curtail the amount of waste—the underlying cause of the climate crisis would still be there. Climate change is a truly political issue because it concerns the common good and justice, and not only power and technical management. As such, it calls for updated politics which recognise our political nature.

The final element of Milbank's anthropology imbues the aforementioned solutions with a specifically theological character as it posits man's preordained role in the Anthropocene. Ecological personalism sees man as a being inclined toward the supernatural and constantly actively involved in divine grace. Though all creation is directed toward the Creator, man remains an absolutely exceptional creature. As Thomas Aquinas writes, "the intellectual soul is said to be on the horizon and confines of things corporeal and incorporeal, in that it is an incorporeal substance and yet the form of a body."<sup>35</sup> The human soul is where the highest of corporality meets the lowest of spirituality. As a consequence, we are suspended between the worldly and the heavenly—between being a beast and an angel, as Blaise Pascal put it.<sup>36</sup>

In stressing man's exceptionality, Milbank stands behind traditional Christian anthropocentrism. As Pope Francis reminds, the fact that God gave man control over the Earth (Gen. 1:28) is not tantamount to absolute ownership. The Earth belongs to God and man is merely a gardener tending to the garden entrusted to him (Gen. 2:15). Aquinas indicates that possessing anything boils down to simply having the use of that thing, and, after St. Ambrose, he reminds that "to spend more than enough is to take by violence."<sup>37</sup> Relying on these teachings, Milbank indicates that only in the Late Middle Ages and modernity there was a return to the Roman understanding of dominion, which led to ruling being equated with power and absolute sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> In ecological personalism on the other hand, man cannot dominate over nature, but must take care of it. In order to highlight man's position in relation to creation, Milbank employs the term "kenotic anthropocentrism." In doing so, he points out the need for humility, for abandoning egotism and fully embracing God's will.

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<sup>35</sup> AQUINAS, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, chap. 68, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Blaise PASCAL, *Thoughts*, in IDEM, *Thoughts, Letters and Minor Works*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: Collier & Son, 1910), §358, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1918), Part 2-2, Question 66, Articles 1–2, p. 225.

<sup>38</sup> MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory*, 13.

Kenotic anthropocentrism sees in man's ontological superiority the foundations of his responsibility for the environment. After all, God entrusted the Earth to man, and neglecting it is a sin. Milbank argues that human presence on Earth need not have a negative impact on the environment but could in fact be a stabilising force on the natural environment, which, when deprived of proper care, is prone to self-destructive "wilding."<sup>39</sup> He illustrates his thesis with the example of overly thick foliage stifling the growth of vegetation on the forest floor. Because of this, humans must become the gardeners and stewards of the Earth as the Book of Genesis dictates. So, despite man's obvious responsibility for the destruction of the environment and for climate change, his exceptionality must not be undermined. In an epoch when humanity has a dominant impact on the natural environment, we cannot renounce responsibility or pretend that Nature will heal itself. Ultimately, only man is a political animal and only through politics we can contain the impending catastrophe.

#### FACES OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Though it may seem that anthropocentrism is the last thing we need in the age of the climate crisis, a growing number of authors recognise its crucial role in the movement to protect the environment. It remains to be seen, however, what kind of anthropocentrism would be of use today. Here, I would like to contrast Milbank's position with two other influential visions, those proposed by Clive Hamilton and Bruno Latour. The former's entails an attempt to transform modern anthropocentrism while the latter's is nonmodern and centres on the actor-network theory. Using these two concepts as reference, I will outline the specifics of kenotic anthropocentrism and further discuss its major features.

Hamilton presents his vision for a new anthropocentrism in the book *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. According to him, anthropocentrism is today a scientific fact rather than a normative postulate.<sup>40</sup> It stems from the onset of the Anthropocene and illustrates the scale of human impact on the environment. In this understanding of the concept, we are still not anthropocentric enough because we have just recently become aware

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<sup>39</sup> MILBANK, "Zarys personalizmu ekologicznego."

<sup>40</sup> Clive HAMILTON, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2017), 38.

of the consequences of man's dominion over the environment. The "monstrous" anthropocentrism existing to date involved increased control over nature and put man up on a pedestal as a conqueror. The new "humble" anthropocentrism, however, recognises that man has become the main geological force and urges us to accept the responsibility that comes with that. In this perspective, anthropocentrism is inevitable because only humans possess the means to repair the damage they have done.

Hamilton paints a picture of a struggle of two super-actors: humanity as a whole (*anthropos*) and the Earth as a whole (the Earth System). In this conflict, humanity cannot be victorious because as its power increases so does the Earth's in response. Due to this, we can no longer think of man as an autonomous entity because the limits of his autonomy are defined by the processes of the Earth System. In this context, Hamilton puts forth the concept of "embedded subject" that becomes ever more agential while at the same time being entangled in natural processes that keep his agency in check (44). Man is no longer the maker of his own fate and must acknowledge the active role of his environment. For this reason, Hamilton describes his position as being antihumanist (45).

On the level of ethics, this picture is augmented with a deontological side. Hamilton argues that in the Anthropocene epoch, man ought to follow the imperative to care for the Earth. This responsibility arises from the sense of gratitude for the freedom that emerges from nature-as-a-whole (106). At the same time, he himself admits that this responsibility lacks appropriate validation. Taking our culture's atheism and nihilism as a given, Hamilton identifies no ethical resources that could correctly orient our actions. Ultimately, the only impetus to act is self-preservation. In this, the Australian scholar corroborates Milbank's criticism of secular responses to the ecological crisis. Here, man's exceptionality is reduced to nothing more than his growing dominion over the environment and his nature—to arbitrary freedom. Hamilton attempts to turn ecology into a new metanarrative providing an objectivist ethical-political framework but there is the sense that even he himself does not believe in the viability of this attempt. This seems to indicate that modern theoretical resources are insufficient to overcome the present apathy.

This leads us to the vision proposed by Latour. The French sociologist rejects anthropocentrism on the most general level as he believes that we must

abandon the thought of any kind of centre—be it man or nature.<sup>41</sup> Instead of contemplating man in relation to nature, we ought to contemplate all of the actors—human and non-human—as equals. According to him, anything has agency as long as it has power to act and influence other actors. Agency is therefore not necessarily related to intentionality or free will and can be expressed even in the simplest interaction. Therefore, Latour is not interested in human community but rather the collective in which humans and non-humans work together in a complex network. He even argues that we should not be speaking of humans at all but rather of terrestrials or the Earthbound, meaning all of Earth's actors.<sup>42</sup> This is because we cannot judge whether in any given situation the most crucial actor will be man, an animal, a virus or a rock. Ontological hierarchy is thus entirely out of play. We are not dealing here with super-actors but with an infinite number of actor-networks in which none is ontologically advantaged.

Paradoxically, this does not mean that humans are not unique actors. As Latour points out, politics in the Anthropocene demands a new kind of representation. Instead of continuing with the dominance of national states claiming representation of societies we should build politics around a representation of the collective that also takes into consideration the interests of non-human actors—like rivers, mountains or endangered species.<sup>43</sup> In this area, humans play a crucial role as it is only they who can represent the interests of the entire collective due to the other actors being silent. Such an approach is surprisingly close to traditional anthropology emphasizing the social and political nature of man. The exceptional political role of humans results from the fact that politics is a uniquely human endeavour. Due to this, we can describe Latour's position as political anthropocentrism.

As it turns out, the nonmodern positions espoused by Milbank and Latour have much in common. Above all, both authors put forth an integral vision of reality, in which everything is interconnected. Latour's concept of collectivity harmonises well with the intuitions of Milbank, who criticizes the modern understanding of society, citing the unrealistic, ahistorical and quasi-theological nature of this category.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in the area of anthropology,

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<sup>41</sup> Bruno LATOUR, *Down to Earth Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 83.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Bruno LATOUR, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity: Cambridge–Medford, 2017), 28.

<sup>44</sup> MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory*, xii.

Milbank deploys the concept of an integral hybrid,<sup>45</sup> which seems to reference Latour's concept of a hybrid in which nature and culture are inextricably entwined.<sup>46</sup> Both authors also stress the integrity of man and his creations. Milbank follows Bernard Stiegler in stating that humanity's unique existence is not possible without technology<sup>47</sup> and that man is always entangled in relations with the non-human. Finally, both authors share a critical stance on secularism. Latour argues that modernity is constituted on a dual separation: humans from non-humans and the world from God.<sup>48</sup> He even goes so far as to claim that an irreligious collective could never exist,<sup>49</sup> albeit his definition of religion as deeply caring about something is excessively general from the Christian perspective.

Alongside all of the similarities, there is also no shortage of differences between Milbank's kenotic anthropocentrism and Latour's political anthropocentrism. More than anything, the consequences of the actor-network theory seem irreconcilable with orthodox Christian thinking. As Graham Harman points out, Latour adopts a model of ultra-concrete actors who cease to exist with each change of relationship.<sup>50</sup> Here, we are not dealing with any permanent substantial subjects but with a network of relations undergoing constant transformation. What's more, in Latour's ontology there are no simple substances, resulting in an infinite regress of actors.<sup>51</sup> While also emphasising the processual and relational nature of the actors, Milbank nevertheless stands behind the substantial understanding of the individual. Though he believes that substance is intangible and always subject to narration, he at the same time understands that without it, personalism becomes impossible. Substance guarantees the persistence and stability of the person. In Latour's ontology, however, this is out of the question.

Another significant incongruity is the role of non-humans. Latour's entire vision centres on the belief that the ontological hierarchy of beings is far from obvious. Meanwhile, Milbank leans on the traditional hierarchy, citing

<sup>45</sup> MILBANK, *Beyond Secular Order*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1–3.

<sup>47</sup> John MILBANK and Adrian PABST, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 251; Bernard STIEGLER, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Braidsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 32–35.

<sup>49</sup> LATOUR, *Facing Gaia*, 152.

<sup>50</sup> Graham HARMAN, *Prince of Networks: Bruno LaTour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 104.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

its obvious sense: from purely physical actors, to chemical ones, biological ones all the way up to animals and humans.<sup>52</sup> He argues that preservation of such a hierarchy is necessary in order to avoid the reductionism that stems from all actors being made equal. It seems however that such a conservative stance can make it difficult to take into account innumerable examples of non-human agency provided by the climate crisis. Like Hamilton, Milbank automatically gives priority to humans, in their actions searching for the causes of the crisis and for its solutions. In effect, he fails to acknowledge material aspects of climate change and focuses solely on its ideological dimension.

#### CONCLUSION

As pointed out by Bińczyk, the debate surrounding the Anthropocene is perhaps the most unique debate of our time.<sup>53</sup> The climate crisis has the potential to demolish the existing *status quo* and to undermine our existing beliefs and practices. It forces us to seriously consider various questions concerning man's future on Earth and opens up a perspective of profound changes in the relationships within the collective existence. In her book *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein underscores the revolutionary potential of climate change and implores us to take advantage of the opportunities it creates.<sup>54</sup> Milbank is also aware of this and reminds us that at stake is not only human fate in the material sense but also in the spiritual one. This is because the debate ultimately concerns the issue of who man really is and what is his relation to creation. Milbank says we must not only strive toward transformation of the economic and political system but that we must also have ultimate end matters in our sights.

Milbank's perspective surely enriches today's debate on the environment, while also carrying with it a number of potential dangers. Above all, it seems to ignore the pressure of time imposed on us by scientific findings. If the coming decades are going to decide the fate of civilisation, it is hard to keep the hope that a radical change of thinking can occur in such a short span of time. Though Milbank places emphasis on theory and practice closely com-

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<sup>52</sup> MILBANK, "Zarys personalizmu ekologicznego."

<sup>53</sup> BIŃCZYK, "The most unique discussion of the 21st century?"

<sup>54</sup> NAOMI KLEIN, *This changes everything: Capitalism vs. the climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2014).

bined, he does however tend to focus on the former. Much seems to suggest that of more interest to him than spurring on enthusiasm to save the Earth is defending traditional Christianity as he sees it. He wholly rejects Christianity's responsibility for the instrumentalization of nature<sup>55</sup> and sees the fault almost exclusively on the side of heretical modernity. It is hard to image that such position could breed enthusiasm to the same degree as the encyclical *Laudato si'*. Consequently, Milbank's uncompromising antiseccularism and antiliberalism could impede the broad debate that Pope Francis encourages. Nevertheless, his voice should not be ignored because his criticism is in large part valid and forces us to search for better solutions to the climate crisis.

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<sup>55</sup> MILBANK, "Out of the Greenhouse," 265.

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INTEGRAL ECOLOGY AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM:  
JOHN MILBANK'S ECOLOGICAL PERSONALISM

Summary

The article discusses the ecological aspects of John Milbank's thought in the context of the growing climate crisis. For this purpose, the concept of integral ecology is interpreted in the spirit of Milbank's integralism, which rejects the notion of "pure nature" as a manifestation of secularism and calls for theological grounding of the environmental discourse. This perspective allows us to see the limitations of the modern way of thinking, caught up in the metaphors of "conquest of nature" and "return to nature." As an alternative, the concept of "kenotic anthropocentrism" is proposed, which sees man as a rational, social, creative and religious animal, that somehow transcends his own nature, being called to union with God. On the one hand, such an approach proclaims the ontological superiority of man over other creatures, and on the other, it reminds us of his role as the guardian—and not the owner—of the Earth. Thus, it differs significantly from Clive Hamilton's "modest anthropocentrism," whose call to care for the environment is ultimately based on arbitrary freedom and the imperative of self-preservation. Milbank's position is closer to Bruno Latour's (anti-)anthropocentrism emphasizing the role of man as a political representative of silent earthlings—rivers, mountains and animals. However, Milbank advocates a strong ontological hierarchy rejected by Latour, which makes him less sensitive to the material dimension of climate change. Moreover, Milbank's militant anti-secularism may be an obstacle to a much needed broader discussion of the ecological crisis, even if his critique of modernity is hard to ignore.

**Keywords:** integral ecology; anthropocentrism; ecological personalism; trans-organicity; anti-secularism.

EKOLOGIA INTEGRALNA I ANTROPOCENTRYZM —  
PERSONALIZM EKOLOGICZNY JOHNA MILBANKA

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia ekologiczny wymiar myśli Johna Milbanka w kontekście narastającego kryzysu klimatycznego. W tym celu, koncepcja ekologii integralnej poddana zostaje interpretacji w duchu Milbankowskiego integralizmu, który odrzuca pojęcie „czystej natury” jako przejawu

sekularyzmu i domaga się teologicznego ugruntowania dyskursu środowiskowego. Taka perspektywa pozwala na dostrzeżenie ograniczeń nowoczesnego sposobu myślenia, uwikłanego w metafory „podboju natury” oraz „powrotu do natury”. Jako alternatywa, zaproponowana zostaje koncepcja „kenotycznego antropocentryzmu”, na gruncie którego człowiek jako zwierzę rozumne, społeczne, twórcze i religijne niejako przekracza swoją własną naturę, będąc powołanym do zjednoczenia z Bogiem. Takie podejście z jednej strony głosi ontologiczną wyższość człowieka nad innymi stworzeniami, z drugiej zaś przypomina o jego roli opiekuna — a nie właściciela — Ziemi. Istotnie różni się ono zatem od „skromnego antropocentryzmu” Clive’a Hamiltona, którego wezwanie do troski o środowisko opiera się ostatecznie na arbitralnej wolności i imperatywie przerwania. Bliżej mu raczej do (anty)antropocentryzmu Bruno Latoura, uwypuklającego rolę człowieka jako politycznego reprezentanta milczących Ziemi — rzek, gór czy zwierząt. Według Milbanka, silna hierarchia ontologiczna, odrzucana przez Latoura, jest jednak niezbędna, co sprawia, że pozostaje on mniej wrażliwy na materialny wymiar zmiany klimatycznej. Co więcej, wojowniczy antysekularyzm Milbanka może stanowić przeszkodę w niezwykle potrzebnej szerszej dyskusji na temat kryzysu ekologicznego, nawet jeśli jego krytyka nowoczesności jest trudno do zignorowania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekologia integralna; antropocentryzm; personalizizm ekologiczny; transorganizacyjność; antysekularyzm.

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