

INTRODUCTION

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THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE

This book tells the story of an intellectual adventure that involved scholars and experts from various disciplines and of different religious beliefs. The adventure reached a climax in a three-day meeting on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, in September 2010 but has actually stretched out over a period of three years, from summer 2009 to summer 2012.

Everything began on a glorious afternoon in late July 2009 with a conversation between Bruno Latour and myself. For some years Latour had been collaborating on a new cultural initiative set up by the Giorgio Cini Foundation in 2004: the *Dialoghi di San Giorgio*, a series of multidisciplinary meetings aimed at encouraging dialogue and debate on key issues for contemporary society, held every year on San Giorgio in mid-September.¹ Latour and I were looking for a theme for the 2010 Dialogue. We had just revisited a miracle of faith, art and technique: the stories from the life of St. Francis in the chapels of the Sacro Monte di Orta. Now, before our eyes a stunningly beautiful landscape unfolded: opposite were the snowfields of the Monte Rosa, and below the still blue mirror of Lake Orta framing the Romanesque architecture on the island of San Giulio as if it were a gray pearl. Our conversation touched on the beauty and fragility of the Earth, on ecological conflicts and the difficulty of implementing effective environmental policies. Then, suddenly, paraphrasing a verse from the Gospel according to St. Mark,² Latour said: “What shall it profit a man to save his soul, if he loses the Earth?”³ This is what gave rise to the idea of devoting a *Dialogo* to the relationship between ecology and theology.

The first step was to select an initial group of scholars to be invited to take part. They were then sent an informal note concisely illustrating the idea to sound out its appeal. We received enthusiastic responses and many comments. The comments of each person were in turn sent to all the other potential participants. New names were put forward and a remote dialogue, so to speak, gradually got underway. This initial group work was useful in constructing the intellectual framework for the *Dialogo*, which was later used to explain the subject and the reasons for the meeting both to newly invited participants and the general public.

THE TOPIC AND REASONS FOR THE DIALOGO

The urgency of the *Dialogo* lay in the widely shared awareness that the gamut of passions mobilized by ecology so far has not reached the level or intensity required for the huge task facing humanity today concerning the fate of the Earth. In the past religion seems to have been able to mobilize transformative passions and energies that produced radical change—of a social, cultural, and even physical nature—on an extraordinary scale. This was arguably because religious passions—for better or for worse—encourage transcendental experience through which human beings become detached from earthly things and can act on them with greater freedom.

The basic question we started from was as follows: can religion help us tackle the ecological crisis we are now facing? The urgency to give spiritual and religious depth to the ecological question appears more evident, if we define the ecosystem not only as a physical environment to be preserved but also as an intrinsically cultural space: the deforestation of the Amazon is not only synonymous with the massive destruction of the forests and the extinction of animal species but also with the destruction of social and mental environments.

There is no easy answer to the basic question. It is not clear if an equivalent level of energy is still available and, if it is, whether it can be used for ecological ends. Attempting to give an answer to the question means exploring the relation between ecology and theology. The debate on the relation between theology and ecology is nothing new. The striking aspect is that the already immense literature on the subject seems not to have an explicitly significant impact on ecological policies. To our mind, there are at least three explanations for the relative sterility of the debate.

First, the fact that in general the various communities—theologians, ecologists, economists, sociologists, and business people—discuss the question internally without any real interaction between the various communities (and this explains the difficulty in formulating a political agenda).

Second, far too often the debate is based on an outmoded conception of science, on a lack of discrimination between the notions of nature, the creation, and the cosmos and on debatable notions of religion, especially Christianity. Reopening the debate on the relation between science and religion—a notoriously trite topic—implies exploring the tension between Nature and the Creation by referring to the ancient theologies elaborated by the Early Church Fathers but also the various natural theology traditions.

Third, what is usually completely overlooked in any analysis of the relation between ecology and theology is the role of conflicts and passion. Many authors seem to presuppose that the two fields are naturally and harmoniously linked, when unfortunately both Nature and the Creation have no lack of drastically conflicting dimensions. As an icon for our dialogue we chose a mosaic in St. Mark's showing the idyllic scene of Noah releasing a dove, the

symbol of the pacified soul; but in the foreground on the endless blue sea, a raven—an allegory of the restless bodily soul—is devouring a carcass. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes: “Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” With this warlike image he highlights the conflictual dimension of salvation.

Another limit in the contemporary eco-theological debate is that it concentrates on “saving” the planet but overlooks the semantic pregnancy of the notion (“salvation”) imbued with religious connotations that go much further than a simple question of survival (this oversight arguably reveals the anguish informing the desire of those not wishing to save anyone other than themselves). What then does “salvation” mean? Who and what must we save and why? Is it possible to give an answer to this question without radically redefining the concepts of nature, environment, ecosystem, cosmos and their relation with soul, society, and the divine?

The key question is therefore perhaps how to mobilize the notions, cosmologies, and rituals characterizing some religious traditions, provided, however, they do not overlook the conflicts underlying the ecological debate and the essential role of politics: without an adequate consideration of the conflicts, arguably no ecological policy is possible.

THE METHOD

The participants, who had various roles at the *Dialogo*, are all those who appear as contributors to this book: theologians of various confessions, environmental strategists, economists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. The invited experts were not asked to give lectures in the traditional sense of the term but to take part in conversations with all the attendant risks. We were convinced that an exchange of different disciplinary and cultural points of view has the potential to generate more fertile ideas and intuitions than other more traditional academic formats of debating and communicating knowledge. This comparative exercise appeared to the *Dialogo* organizers as the most significant and perhaps the only antidote possible to all kinds of rampant fundamentalisms. It was also a resolute way of being faithful to the unarmed St. George on the dome of the church on the island of San Giorgio, to which history and perhaps also nature have assigned the role of being a place for meetings and exchanges between disciplines and cultures.

Each participant was asked to send or indicate a previously published paper that addressed significant aspects of the chosen topic. These writings were then sent to all the other participants, not necessarily as an anticipation of what each would have said, but as a way of introducing oneself to the others and to improving mutual knowledge ahead of the three days of meetings so as to make them more fruitful.

THE EXPERIENCE

The evening before the first day of the *Dialogo* (September 13, 2010), an inaugural event was held. It consisted of two “speeches” framed by the performance of two pieces of music. In keeping with the Cini Foundation tradition, we wished that the eminently intellectual experience of the *Dialogo* was introduced and supplemented by an aesthetic experience, stimulating forms of cognition not involving logical-analytical processes but intuition, emotions, and feelings.

The first piece of music was Milhaud’s *The Creation of the World*, a composition inspired by the African myths of the Creation evoking the chaos before the world, the appearance of animals and vegetation, and the birth of man and woman. Pasquale Gagliardi, Secretary General of the Cini Foundation, then presented the program of the *Dialogo*. Next Cardinal Angelo Scola, Patriarch of Venice, pronounced an allocution on the theme *Taking in the Real: Human Beings and the Earth* (see Chapter 1 in this book). The event ended with the three movements from Mahler’s *Song of the Earth* performed by the alto soloist, including the outstanding—not only because of its length but also for its symbolic value—last movement of the whole composition (“Farewell”).

The *Dialogo* was held over the next three days, from September 14 to 16. The participants sat for three days at the round table in the *Sala dei Cipressi* in the Cini Foundation. Each day, three debate sessions were held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The proceedings were mainly conducted in English and each session was introduced by one of the participants. The general public could attend the sessions without taking part in the discussion directly. The organizers wished that the public should only be a silent presence to underscore and enhance that “listening atmosphere,” deemed to be of fundamental importance for the success of the event.

The sequence of the chapters in this book reflects the order of the sessions introduced by the various participants and fairly faithfully documents what happened during the three days in the recorded formal sessions open to the public. On each of the three days, however, the participants also met informally at the end of the sessions—from 4 to 5 p.m.—in the living room of the Foundation guest quarters for a kind of “writing workshop.” Their aim was to set down some of the main ideas that had been thrown up during the day in order to draft gradually over the three days a kind of charter or manifesto, which could then be handed out at the end of the meeting.

Unsurprisingly, different and contrasting opinions immediately emerged about the aims and methodology of the workshop. Marked tensions between the views of different participants were expressed, and are clear in the record of the debates. There was no provision for a final session in which to draw conclusions or exchange closing remarks. Rather, a draft manifesto was fiercely debated and, despite attempts at mediation, participants were unable to reach an agreed text. Such dissent might perhaps have been expected: conflict and passion provided not only the salutary theme but also the structural

model for our dialogue. Having discussed the matter at length with my coeditors, I was reminded of the clue suggested in 1985 by Thompson and James⁴ in their analysis of debates on environmental policies, taken up again in 1992 by Mary Douglas. Applying a cultural theory to these often heated, confused, and inconclusive debates reveals that the different positions and arguments are based on various (robust, fragile, or unpredictable) myths of nature:

Cultural theory starts by identifying the context of appeals to nature, then it uncovers the strategies of debate, and shows the foundation myth as the final clinching argument. In fact, the base line does not clinch anything, because there is no way of demonstrating that one or the other myth of nature is the right one. At some point the summoning of evidence becomes unnecessary, more evidence will not settle the divergence of opinion. Somewhere along the line the debaters realize that they are facing infinite regress, more explanations calling forth more counter-explanations, and when this happens, theorizing has to end. In a debate about what to do with the environment, explanations come to rest on their appropriate myths of nature.⁵

We were left with a paradox. Despite, or indeed because of, the amount of energy devoted to reaching a consensual outcome, no formal conclusion was achieved: this was unprecedented in the history of the *Dialoghi*. This feeling of incompleteness, expressed by various participants, led me a few months after the event to ask everyone to make a retrospective interpretation and sum up their personal thoughts on the whole experience.⁶ Most of the participants agreed to take part in this kind of virtual final session and their reflections are contained in the “Afterthoughts,” the second part of the book.

NOTES

1. The *Dialoghi di San Giorgio* are a new version of a long-standing annual event at the Foundation, the *Corso di Alta Cultura* (“Course of High Culture”). For almost 50 years this course saw authoritative scholars and leading witnesses of our age come to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, where the Foundation is based. The *Dialoghi* have gathered and developed the legacy of those courses by adapting them to the times without sacrificing their spirit and function. As at the time of the *Corsi di Alta Cultura*, today for the Cini Foundation the *Dialoghi* provide an emblematic opportunity to bear witness to the values that have always inspired its actions over time: a faith in knowledge that stems from dialogue, the search for truth in freedom, and the sense of providing a service to the scientific community, to the city and society in general. The *Dialoghi* of 2004 (*Atmospheres of Freedom. For an Ecology of Good Government*), 2005 (*The Architecture of Babel. Creations, Extinctions and Intercessions in the Languages of the Global World*), and 2007 (*Inheriting the Past. Tradition, Translation, Betrayal, Innovation*) led to the publication of the following books, respectively: Bruno Latour and Pasquale Gagliardi (eds.), *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue pour un monde commun* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil, 2006); Paolo Fabbri

- and Tiziana Migliore (eds.), *The Architectures of Babel. Creation, Extinctions and Intercessions in the Language of the Global World* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2011); Pasquale Gagliardi, Bruno Latour and Pedro Memelsdorff (eds.), *Coping with the Past. Creative Perspectives on Conservation and Restoration* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2010).
2. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).
 3. This phrase was actually the title of an article Bruno Latour had recently published: B. Latour, "Si tu viens à perdre la Terre, à quoi te sert d'avoir sauvé ton âme?," *Revue-Theologicum.fr*, <http://www.catho-theo.net/spip.php?article248>
 4. M. Thompson and P. James, "The cultural theory of risk," in *Environmental Threats: Reception, Analysis, and Management*, edited by J. Brown (London: Belhaven, 1985).
 5. M. Douglas, "In defence of shopping," in *Produktkulturen. Dynamik und Bedeutungswandel des Konsums*, edited by R. Eisendle and E. Miklautz (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1992).
 6. See "A Preliminary Notice," p. 223.