

# Human Rights and the Environment – Theoretical, Moral and Religious Foundations

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## ABSTRACT

This book chapter deals with the theoretical, moral, and religious foundations of environmental protection. One of the most significant developments in the legal protection of the environment is the growing demand for recognising the right to an environment of a certain quality as a universal human right. The chapter analyses theoretical approaches that establish a connection between environment and human rights. Furthermore, it examines the right to environment as an ethical demand that meets conditions to qualify as the basis of a human right. The chapter argues that the approach advocating for the recognition of a standalone substantive right to an environment of particular quality has gained prominence and is likely to lead to its recognition as a universal human right. This perspective does not preclude other theoretical approaches, which should be regarded as complementary. Nevertheless, this emerging right requires further theoretical development grounded in contemporary human rights theories.

## KEYWORDS

environment, protection, human rights, moral foundations, theories of rights, Christianity

## 1. Introduction

This book chapter examines the most prominent theoretical approaches to the recognition of the right to an environment of a particular quality as a universal human right. It has already been recognised that the right to environment is under-theorised and contested.<sup>1</sup> As Bándi has noted, environmental law generally requires a conceptual basis for several reasons, including its recent emergence and relatively short history; consequently, ‘this area of law can hardly be considered as being settled’.<sup>2</sup> Even though in last decades significant efforts have been observed on international, regional and national levels to interrelate environment and human rights, the rights-based

1 Chalabi, 2023, p. 1.

2 Bándi, 2020, p. 36.

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approach to environment is not sufficiently elaborated on a theoretical level. As one of the proponents of the recognitions of this right admitted, there are ‘dilemmas concerning the nature and extent of the right, the shape of the right, the content of the right, the threshold required to trigger harm under the right and other definitional and content-based hurdles’.<sup>3</sup> This holds significance not only from a theoretical point of view but can also have practical implications. The definition of this right should be precise in its nature, content, and scope, including its relationship with other human rights and their enjoyment. Important questions arise whether there is a standalone and substantive right ‘to an environment of a particular quality’,<sup>4</sup> whether it should be considered as individual, collective, or ‘global right’,<sup>5</sup> who can be a right-holder, who is under corresponding obligations, and most importantly *how* this right can be enjoyed and protected.

Since the mid-20th century, and particularly from the 1960s and 1970s onward, the scientific community, the general public, and nation-states have increasingly come to recognise the consequences of industrialisation, the unrestricted exploitation of natural resources, and environmental pollution. Beginning in the 1960s, the development of environmental ethics as an academic discipline gained momentum, accompanied by growing scholarly interest in investigating the underlying causes of an increasingly evident ecological crisis. During this period, significant attention was drawn to Lynn White Jr.’s seminal article, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ (1967), in which he argued that the theology of certain Christian traditions contributed to the legitimization of an exploitative attitude toward nature – particularly through interpretations of biblical teaching that affirm God’s granting of dominion to humanity over the natural world.<sup>6</sup>

These and similar critiques prompted Christian theologians in the following decades to articulate authentic theological responses to the ecological crisis, aiming to express a distinctly Christian perspective on the relationship between humanity, nature, and the environment. As will be shown in the following section, the contemporary ecological crisis is not merely a problem situated within the realms of science or technology, but is, from a Christian point of view, an event of profound spiritual and moral significance. We will also demonstrate that Christian theology does, in fact, offer clear responses to the ecological crisis, along with constructive pathways for addressing and overcoming its challenges.

This chapter provides in-depth insights into five different approaches to the relationship between the environment and human rights discussed in the next section (2). Section 3 explores the moral foundations for recognising the right to an environment of a particular quality. The last two sections examine the shared biblical foundations of the Christian understanding of ecology (4) and distinctive approaches, documents,

3 MacDonald, 2008, p. 214.

4 Lewis, 2018, p. 59.

5 Chalabi, 2023, p. 2.

6 Cf. Kawall, 2017, p. 13; Santmire, 1985, p. 1.

and initiatives within the Christian Churches (5). The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings of the analysis (8).

## 2. Different Approaches to the Relationship Between the Environment and Human Rights

The link between environmental protection and human rights has been primarily established through a body of procedural rights, commonly recognised in legal scholarship as ‘environmental rights’.<sup>7</sup> These rights include ‘access to environmental information, participation in the decision-making process of environmental policies, availability of legal remedies to redress environmental damage, and due process rights in general’.<sup>8</sup> They also encompass the right to compensation for environmental damage.<sup>9</sup> Boyle concludes that procedural rights represent ‘the most important environmental addition to human rights law since the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development’.<sup>10</sup>

From a normative perspective, there is broader consensus on the procedural protection of the environment compared to the establishment of a substantive and/or standalone right to an environment of a certain quality. These can be identified in a number of treaties, including the Aarhus Convention,<sup>11</sup> the content of which is predominantly procedural.<sup>12</sup> Judicial litigation has been recognized as an important tool even for the protection of future generations.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars argue that although recent human rights case law has increasingly addressed environmental issues, this does not yet imply that environmental rights are fully integrated into international law; rather, it suggests that such rights ought to be recognised in some form,<sup>14</sup> and ‘indicates the importance of the topic in mainstream human rights law’.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, there are two main approaches to establishing a substantive connection between environmental protection and human rights, both of which fall under the category of ‘environmental human rights’. These are: the ‘greening’ of existing human rights, and the recognition of a standalone right to a healthy environment.<sup>16</sup> The first approach, the greening of human rights,<sup>17</sup> emphasises the environmental

7 Shelton, 1991, p. 103.

8 Rodriguez-Rivera, 2001, p. 15.

9 Lewis, 2018, pp. 4–5.

10 Boyle, 2012, p. 616.

11 Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, 2161 UNTS 447, entered into force 30 October 2001.

12 Boyle, 2012, p. 622. The neglect of the substantive right in the Aarhus Convention has been attributed to the ambiguity of its language. Barritt, 2024, p. 84.

13 Weiss, 2024, p. 69.

14 Merrills, 1996, p. 40.

15 Boyle, 2012, p. 614.

16 Chalabi, 2023, p. 3.

17 Boyle, 2012, p. 614; Boyle, 2006, p. 472; Van der Bank and Van der Bank, 2014, p. 59.

dimensions of already established rights, such as the right to life, the right to health, the right to private and family life, the right to property, and the right to an adequate standard of living. It is based on the assumption that better protection to both human rights and environment can be provided by expanding the environmental dimension of existing human rights, rather than ‘pursuing the adoption of a new, standalone right to a good environment’.<sup>18</sup>

This approach is not only a European, but rather a global phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> In this chapter the focus will be on Central and Eastern European countries and subsequently, the case law developed from disputes in these countries.<sup>20</sup> The environmental dimension of certain human rights has been recognised in a number of cases of the European Court of Human Rights and other international courts and fora. For example, in the *Gabcikovo-Nagymaros* case, which involved Hungary and Slovakia, the Vice-President of the International Court of Justice highlighted that:

‘The protection of the environment is likewise a vital part of contemporary human rights doctrine, for it is a *sine qua non* for numerous human rights such as the right to health and the right to life itself. It is scarcely necessary to elaborate on this, as damage to the environment can impair and undermine all the human rights spoken of in the Universal Declaration and other human rights instruments’.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, claims of certain human rights violations can be based on environmental damage, as a healthy environment is viewed as a precondition for the enjoyment of certain fundamental rights.

Lewis has highlighted the distinction between the direct and indirect environmental dimensions of human rights,<sup>22</sup> a differentiation also recognised by the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>23</sup> This distinction underscores that, on the one hand, the enjoyment of certain rights is directly depended on the environment of particular quality and environmental degradation directly affects the ability of right holders to enjoy their rights. On the other hand, poor environmental conditions can indirectly impede right holders from being informed about their rights and obstruct public authorities from protecting and upholding the rights of their citizens. In this sense, a proper environment can be perceived as a precondition of the enjoyment of human rights for two main reasons: a) it is essential for the enjoyment of a certain rights (the typical example is the right to life, which depends directly on the availability of

18 Lewis, 2018, p. 15.

19 Boyle, 2012, p. 614.

20 For a Central European perspective on the constitutional protection of the environment see Szilágyi, 2022.

21 ‘Environmental damage can have negative implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights’. International Court of Justice, 1997.

22 Lewis, 2018, p. 16.

23 United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011.

drinkable water and clean air and soil); b) an adequate environment fosters the general protection and enjoyment of human rights.<sup>24</sup> In conclusion, it is widely accepted that the quality of the environment can both directly and indirectly influence – or even determine – the enjoyment of certain protected rights, and this fact has been used as an argument in favour of the ongoing process of greening of human rights.

Even though the greening of human rights approach has led to the noteworthy emergence of ‘green’ jurisprudence under regional and international human rights law, it remains anthropocentric in its nature and does not provide sufficient protection to the environment as such. Regarding the European human rights system, Jendroška observed that ‘the respective case law makes it however crystal clear that the prerequisite for the possibility of environmental claims under the ECHR is the existence of personal harm, not a harm to the environment objectively understood’.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Chalabi has identified six grounds on which this approach can be criticised. First, it narrows the scope of the protection by recognising environmental damage only when it is linked to existing individual human rights. Second, it neglects or undervalues the collective dimension of environmental damage. Third, it renders difficult to prove that certain infringements are a ‘but-for’ cause of environmental damage.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, it is backward oriented overlooking the consequences of environmental harm on future generations. Fifth, this approach is limited to internal damages which are not regulated by international environmental law. Finally, this approach ‘has failed to provide a firm theoretical explanation to connect environment and already recognised human rights, and therefore, what has been proposed is more eclectic than integrated’.<sup>27</sup> To conclude, despite the positive impacts of the greening of human rights, this approach has proven insufficient to guarantee the effective protection of a healthy environment.

The second approach to establishing a substantive connection between environmental protection and human rights is the recognition of the standalone right to a healthy environment. The notion of a standalone and substantive right to a particular quality of environment has attracted scholarly attention during the last decades. Opinions among scholars vary widely, ranging from the view that existing law does not provide sufficient environmental protection and therefore a standalone right should fill this gap,<sup>28</sup> to the acceptance of the assertion that this right does not exist and there is no reason for it to be recognised.<sup>29</sup> This section of the chapter will briefly outline the current state of recognition of the human right to a healthy environment,

24 Lewis, 2018, p. 16.

25 Jendroška, 2023, p. 152.

26 But-for causation, is a test used to determine factual causation i.e. whether the defendant’s conduct is a *conditio sine qua non* of the plaintiff’s injury. In some environmental cases the use of this test may be improper since the determination of but-for causation is almost impossible. E.g. in global warming cases it is nearly impossible to prove that emissions of a certain entity are responsible for the injury. Harvard Law Review, 2015, p. 2265.

27 Chalabi, 2023, pp. 4–5.

28 Doelle, 2004, p. 216; Turner, 2004, p. 301.

29 Shelton, 2011, p. 279.

followed by a discussion of the main arguments for and against establishing a stand-alone human right to an environment of a particular quality.

No universal legally binding human rights instrument guarantees the right to the preservation of an environment of a particular quality. The International Bill of Human Rights makes no reference to the protection of the environment.<sup>30</sup> However, significant efforts at international, regional, and national levels have been made to introduce a substantive right to a healthy environment as a human right. Among the most recent developments are the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, adopted on 28 July 2022.<sup>31</sup> The same resolution was adopted by the Human Rights Council on 8 October 2021.<sup>32</sup> Although these resolutions are not legally binding, they indicate a movement within the UN system towards recognising a standalone right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

On a regional level, the Council of Europe adopted a Recommendation on Human Rights and the Protection of the Environment, in which the Committee of Ministers recommended Member States to actively consider recognising the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment at the national level.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, neither the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), nor the European Social Charter formally recognise a standalone right to a healthy or good environment.<sup>34</sup> This absence of a formal legal basis has led the ECtHR in some cases to reject applications seeking general environmental protection,<sup>35</sup> reiterating that ‘no right to nature preservation is as such included among the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention’.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, African and Inter-American human rights systems explicitly recognise the right to an environment of particular quality. The 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights provides in Article 24 that ‘all peoples shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development’.<sup>37</sup> The Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Protocol of San Salvador) in Article 11 specifies that ‘everyone shall have the right to live in a healthy environment’.<sup>38</sup> The significant difference is that it

30 The only convention with universal application that to some extent protects the right to environment is the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. See Atapattu, 2002, p. 98.

31 United Nations General Assembly, 2022.

32 United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021.

33 Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 2022.

34 Regarding the terminology used to describe this right, different scholars and institutions have employed various adjectives for the noun ‘environment’, such as good, healthy, safe, clean, decent, unpolluted, suitable, and others. See for more: Lewis, 2018, p. 61; Rodriguez-Rivera, 2001, p. 10.

35 Kobylarz, 2021, p. 18.

36 See cases from Central and Eastern Europe: *ECtHR, Ogloblina v. Russia*, Application No. 28852/05, Decision of 26 November 2013, Para. 26, and *ECtHR, Dubetska and Others v. Ukraine*, Application No. 30499/03, Judgement of 10 February 2011, Para. 105.

37 African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, n.d.

38 Organization of American States, 1988.

is only the Protocol that explicitly recognises an individual right to the environment, making it the first and only binding human rights instrument to do so.<sup>39</sup>

At the national level, the situation is more advanced: the right to a healthy environment is constitutionally protected in at least 110 countries, and over 80 percent of UN Member States (156 out of 193) legally recognise this right.<sup>40</sup> Turner has identified two types of constitutional environmental protections that parallel the distinction between the greening of human rights approach and the recognition of a standalone right to a healthy environment. The first type includes constitutions that explicitly provide specific rights aimed at environmental protection. The second type comprises constitutions with provisions that were not originally designed to protect the environment but have been interpreted and applied to that effect.<sup>41</sup>

To conclude, the right to an environment of particular quality appears to be progressing from the ground up, being most widely recognised at the national level, less so at the regional level, and not yet established as a universal human right.

A major shortcoming of the ‘greening’ of human rights approach is that environmental harm cannot engage human rights law unless it is clearly demonstrated that it affects the enjoyment of another existing human right. This limitation simultaneously serves as the strongest argument in favour of recognising a standalone right to a healthy environment, which would enable the protection of the environment as such, without the need to demonstrate violation of any other human right.<sup>42</sup> Scholars have indicated that the existing law, and especially procedural rights, are inadequate and insufficient to provide the meaningful protection of the environment and to guarantee the access to a good and healthy environment, thus they proposed a standalone human right to environment to fill this gap.<sup>43</sup>

Boyd argued that the recognition of this right would strengthen environmental laws and justice and increase the accountability of states and non-state actors for failing to protect the environment.<sup>44</sup> Another argument in favour of a standalone right to environment is that it can serve as ‘a lever to overcome classical hurdles in human rights-based environmental litigation, such as locus standi and, more generally, a burden of proof that is often too heavy on applicants’.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it could reduce costs and empower the judiciary and other organizations to improve environmental law implementation.<sup>46</sup>

Conversely, some scholars criticise the notion of a standalone right. Handl described such attempts as ‘duplicative efforts’, and instead advocates for further

39 Leib, 2011, p. 99.

40 Chalabi, 2025, p. 6.

41 Turner, 2004, p. 285.

42 Lewis, 2018, p. 60.

43 Lewis has thoroughly examined and presented the opinions of scholars found in older literature. Lewis, 2018, pp. 63–64.

44 He has also identified other benefits that do not have a legal nature but are important for the protection of the environment. Boyd, 2018, pp. 25–41.

45 Boyd, 2011, p. 181.

46 Vilchez and Savaresi, 2021, p. 4.

development of the existing environment protection structures and mechanisms.<sup>47</sup> More recently, Knox in his Report to the Human Rights Council, recognised that the ‘explicit recognition of the human right to a healthy environment thus turned out to be unnecessary for the application of human rights norms to environmental issues’. However, he recommended that the Human Rights Council ‘consider supporting the recognition of the right in a global instrument’.<sup>48</sup> His proposal was based on the experience of countries that provide constitutional protection to the right to environment.

A general argument against introducing new human rights without sufficient justification, for the reason that it may undermine the integrity of the human rights overall, was also employed in the case of the recognition of the right to environment.<sup>49</sup> As Shelton points out ‘environmental protection probably cannot be wholly incorporated into the human rights agenda without deforming the concept of human rights and distorting its program’.<sup>50</sup>

One of the basic shortcomings of this right is its vagueness and lack of precise definition. Lee argued that ‘without rigorous definition, a right to a healthy environment risks remaining an irrelevant member of the group of third-generation human rights which have proliferated recently’.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, scholars have expressed fears that it will distract attention from improving the nexus between environment and human rights. In summary, the benefits and shortcomings of both the “greening of human rights” and the recognition of a standalone right to the environment suggest a need for further theoretical elaboration and examination of their implications for human rights theory and practice.

Another recently developed approach breaks the traditional link between human interests, human rights, and the environment. This emerging body of law recognises legal rights for nature and its elements, such as rivers, mountains, and other natural objects.<sup>52</sup> A famous example is New Zealand’s *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017*, which, in Section 14, declared the *Whanganui River* a legal person with fundamental rights, powers, duties, and liabilities.<sup>53</sup> This was the first legislation worldwide to recognise the legal personality of a river.<sup>54</sup> Although this approach is both innovative and attractive, it does not establish a new relationship between human rights and the environment. Rather, it represents a specific legal approach to the issue of preservation of the physical and even spiritual values of the natural environment. This approach could be interpreted in a wider context of the dichotomy of anthropocentric protection of the environment vs. protection for its own sake, i.e. for the purpose of saving the nature because of its intrinsic value. However, even

47 Handl, 1992, p. 137.

48 Knox, 2018, p. 4.

49 Lewis, 2018, p. 65.

50 Shelton, 2006, p. 169.

51 Lee, 2000, p. 297.

52 Lewis, 2018, p. 5.

53 New Zealand Parliament, 2017.

54 Collins and Esterling, 2019, pp. 2–3.

in the case of the recognition of the legal personality of natural objects, which has contributed to their better protection and preservation, the positive effects of this innovation always include the benefits of people living close to natural objects. This is the proof that the anthropocentric and nature-centric approaches to the protection of environment are not opposed but, intertwined, interdependent and interconnected.

A new theoretical model of the right to environment has been proposed by Chalabi, based on his NIC theory of human rights. Drawing on his critique of the limitations found in three existing theories of rights (the interest theory of rights, the needs-based approach, and the capability approach) Chalabi developed an integrated theory that highlights the interconnection and interrelation between human needs, interests, and capabilities (NIC) upon which basic human rights are grounded. As Chalabi points out ‘being endowed with a basic right consists of being capable of meeting one or more of basic needs in accordance with interests’.<sup>55</sup> The same author extends this approach to the right to environment as follows: ‘being endowed with a right to the environment consists of being capable of living in an environment of *certain qualities* where human beings *can* meet their basic needs in accordance with their interests’.<sup>56</sup> He further elaborates that the phrase ‘certain qualities’ includes also the sustainability of an environment of particular qualities over time. According to this integrative theoretical approach, every act or even omission that negatively affects the quality and sustainability of environment will represent infringement of the right to environment.

One common question regarding any human right is whether it is individual or collective. This theory expands the right to a healthy environment as a “multi-level concept”, providing a system of protection on three levels: (1) the right to environment as an individual right; (2) the right to environment as a collective right; and (3) the right to environment as a global right. Individuals would be able to invoke this right to protect their individual interests regarding the environment, while ‘the scope and severity of harm at this level can be limited to specific person(s) and the number of people affected can be low with often even focusing on the current or near future harms’.<sup>57</sup> At the collective level, it recognises the shared environmental interests of communities and groups, emphasising the protection of biodiversity that sustains collective well-being. The global level addresses environmental harms with planetary-scale impacts, such as climate change, which threaten life on Earth and require protection beyond local or national boundaries. This multi-level framework moves away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach, allowing for a graded understanding of environmental harm based on factors such as severity, scope, and irreversibility. It also implies differentiated forms of legal protection, obligations, and standing for individuals, collectives, and global actors.<sup>58</sup>

55 Chalabi, 2025, p. 9.

56 Chalabi, 2025, p. 10.

57 Chalabi, 2025, p. 13.

58 Chalabi, 2025, p. 19.

### 3. Moral Approaches to the Human Right to Environment

Since the advent of the environmental law in the 1970s, works that established the field of environmental ethics have also been published. From the outset, the debate on ethical and moral approaches to the environmental crisis engaged both theologians and philosophers.<sup>59</sup> However, the discussion was centred on the relationship between humanity and nature, even though this dualism sometimes has been found as one being responsible for the environmental crisis.

The question of the justificatory foundations for a human right to an environment of particular quality can be positioned within the classic jurisprudential debate between legal and moral theories of rights. Rather than undertaking an exhaustive analysis of these theories,<sup>60</sup> this section addresses whether the right to a healthy environment can be understood as a moral right, thereby providing grounds for its recognition by international law.

One of the most well-known articulations of the law-centred theory of rights is Bentham's provocative assertion: '*Right*, the substantive *right*, is the child of law: from *real* laws come *real* rights; but from *imaginary* laws, from laws of nature, fancied and invented by poets, rhetoricians, and dealers in moral and intellectual poisons, come *imaginary* rights'.<sup>61</sup> This law-centred approach has dominated the international human rights theory, practice and scholarship. Nonetheless, it has become evident that legal theories of rights suffer from conceptual disadvantages. Rodríguez-Garavito argues that 'rights are fundamentally moral claims about the intrinsic worth of every human being, and of the importance of the prerogatives they protect to a dignified human life'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Sen asserts that human rights are articulations of social ethics and represent 'significant ethical claims'.<sup>63</sup> In another work, Sen further notes that 'human rights can be seen as primarily ethical demands. They are not principally "legal," "proto-legal" or "ideal-legal" commands'. Human rights as ethical demands may indeed inspire legislation; however, their influence on lawmaking is an additional feature rather than an essential characteristic of human rights themselves. Sen, therefore, proposes two threshold conditions that an ethical demand – such as the right to a healthy environment – must meet to qualify as the basis of human rights: special importance and social influenceability.<sup>64</sup>

The right to environment of particular quality meets both threshold conditions. The protection of the environment is undeniably of special importance on national, regional, and international levels. While it has not yet been universally acknowledged as a human right, significant efforts by governments, non-governmental

59 Kawal, 2017, p. 14.

60 Herstein, 2023.

61 Bentham, 1792, p. 523.

62 Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018, p. 157.

63 Sen, 2006, pp. 2917–2919.

64 Sen, 2004, p. 319.

organizations, religious groups, and others seek to enshrine the right to a healthy environment and to raise public awareness of its significance for human well-being and the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. Furthermore, this right is socially influenceable, as the future of human societies hinges on the state of the environment and, conversely, its realisation depends on the decisions of human-controlled entities and individuals such as governments, civil society, religious organizations etc.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, Rodríguez-Garavito's conclusion that the entitlement to a healthy environment already constitutes a human right is compelling,<sup>66</sup> even as full recognition at international and regional levels remains to be achieved.

#### **4. Shared Biblical-Theological Foundations of the Christian Understanding of Ecology**

The Bible represents the primary source of faith for all traditional Christian communities. Although it is first and foremost a religious text, the Bible also contains foundational principles concerning humanity's relationship with nature and the created world. For ecologists and all those concerned with environmental issues, the study of the Scripture provides an essential framework for understanding the human role within creation.

At the heart of Christian cosmology lies the doctrine that God is the Creator of the world and that the world was brought into being out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). From this doctrine – articulated especially in the Book of Genesis – several conclusions may be drawn that are directly relevant to the preservation of the natural environment:

- a) God is the Creator of the entire world in all its diversity: of heaven and earth, light and darkness, water and land, plants and animals. The world did not come into being by chance; rather, God deliberately willed to create it as a harmonious, meaningful, and interconnected whole (Gen 1). The phrase repeatedly found in the creation account – 'And God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:12) – indicates that God's creative act was not arbitrary, but that everything created has its own authentic place within the order of creation and within God's providential design for the world. This also implies that creation is inherently good and possesses value in itself, independent of human utility; it must not, therefore, be regarded merely as a resource to be (mis)used by humanity.
- b) God not only created the world, but also continues to care for it actively, sustaining and renewing creation. This ongoing divine involvement in the natural world is attested to in numerous biblical passages (cf. Ps. 104:24–30; Ps. 19; etc.).

<sup>65</sup> Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018, p. 158.

<sup>66</sup> Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018, p. 159.

- c) Ultimately, God creates the human being in His own image and entrusts him with dominion over the created world and authority over all living beings (Gen. 1:26–28). This dominion, however, ought to be interpreted not as an arbitrary rule, but rather as a vocation of responsible stewardship over creation – an order which God Himself brought into being and declared good. Accordingly, the continuation of the biblical narrative affirms: ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it’ (Gen. 2:15). From a biblical-theological perspective, the human task is thus to safeguard the integrity of nature through conscientious governance, reflecting the divine concern for all living creatures, as exemplified in the account of Noah (Gen. 6–9), where God’s care extends beyond humanity to encompass the entirety of animate life.
- d) God appointed the human being to govern creation, thereby entrusting him with responsibility for the entirety of the created order. Nevertheless, the human remains but one of God’s creatures – intimately bound to the whole of nature. This interconnectedness is clearly reflected in the biblical doctrine of original sin (Gen. 3), wherein the earth itself becomes cursed as a consequence of human transgression. Sin thus disrupts not only the relationship between God and humanity, but also the harmony between humanity and nature. Due to human sinfulness the earth suffers, and it is the human being who bears the primary responsibility for restoring the original relationship between God and creation. This includes overcoming the corruption that entered the material world as a result of sin (cf. Rom. 8:20–22) and working toward the redemption of all that is material.
- e) A fundamental transformation in the relationship between God and humanity occurs through the Incarnation of Christ. The Son of God, through whom the world was created (John 1:3), becomes human, assumes human nature – that is, a material body – and enters into the created order. Through Christ, reconciliation between humanity and God is accomplished (cf. Col. 1:15–20; Eph. 1:10), and this redemptive act inevitably bears implications for the natural world as well. By taking on a material body, Christ affirms the enduring value of creation, and through His Transfiguration (cf. Matt. 17:1–9), it becomes evident that human salvation does not entail the annihilation of the material world, but rather its transfiguration. In Christ, all becomes a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and the Christian hope in the Kingdom of Heaven necessarily includes the renewal and transformation of the entirety of creation.

## 5. Distinctives, Documents and Initiatives Within the Christian Churches

The biblical teaching on the creation and salvation of humanity and the world constitutes a fundamental and indispensable foundation for ethical and ecological engagement among Christians across all denominations. Nevertheless, as with

certain other doctrinal matters, one can observe distinctive emphases and specific approaches among various Christian churches in their treatment of ecological concerns. Furthermore, all Christian churches – both at local and global levels – have initiated and continue to promote numerous practical initiatives aimed at awakening and cultivating awareness of the theological and spiritual foundations of ecology. The number of such texts and initiatives has grown exponentially over recent decades, rendering a comprehensive overview nearly impossible. Therefore, in what follows, we shall present only the most theologically significant documents and initiatives.

### 5.1. The Catholic Church

Although Catholic theology had previously offered more or less explicit reflections on environmental protection and the human relationship to nature and material resources,<sup>67</sup> one of the earliest direct acknowledgments of the emerging ecological crisis can be found in the Apostolic Letter ‘*Octogesima Adveniens*’ by Pope Paul VI. In this letter, the Pope draws attention to the increasingly evident ecological crisis as a consequence of human activity – specifically, the result of the reckless exploitation of nature and natural resources, a process in which humanity ultimately becomes its own victim.<sup>68</sup> Following this initial call, subsequent popes – as well as bishops, theologians, and various Catholic Church organizations – began to engage systematically with ecological issues,<sup>69</sup> offering ecclesial responses to the growing environmental challenges. In the encyclical ‘*Sollicitudo rei socialis*’, which primarily addresses economic development and global inequality as pressing social concerns, Pope John Paul II critiques consumerism and emphasises that economic progress must not come at the expense of indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, some of which are finite and non-renewable. Every form of societal development must incorporate a moral dimension, one that takes into account the integrity of both living and non-living nature, as well as the broader natural order.<sup>70</sup>

The necessity of respecting the divinely ordained and natural order is further emphasised by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical ‘*Centesimus Annus*’ in which he introduces the concept of ‘human ecology’. In this context, he affirms that care for the natural environment is inseparable from care for the human person, thereby establishing a profound link between ecology and anthropology: ‘In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the human environment, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves. Although people are rightly worried [...] about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, [...] too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’. Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the

67 Cf. for example Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, p. 34.

68 *Octogesima Adveniens*. Apostolic Letter of Pope Paul VI, 1971, p. 21.

69 Bándi, 2022, p. 41.

70 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, p. 34.

original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed'.<sup>71</sup> Care for nature and the preservation of the environment thereby becomes care for the human person; the ecological crisis is thus understood as intrinsically linked to the spiritual and moral crisis of humanity.

This integrative approach to ecology is further developed and deepened by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical '*Caritas in Veritate*', where environmental protection is closely linked to ethics, social injustice, solidarity, and the broader socio-political framework:

“There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are inter-related, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature’.<sup>72</sup>

Pope Francis underscores the fact that the ecological crisis is simultaneously a social and political crisis, and that humanity's relationship with nature is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, political, cultural, ethnic, and other factors. In his encyclical '*Laudato si'*', he moves beyond the boundaries of conventional environmental discourse and develops the concept of integral ecology. Behind integral theology lies the idea<sup>73</sup> that all creation – since God is the Creator of everything that exists – is intrinsically interconnected and constitutes ‘a kind of universal family’.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, nature is not merely the environment that man inhabits; rather, the human being is part of nature and is in constant interaction with it. For this reason, the Pope emphasises:

‘Recognising the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behaviour patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. [...] It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental’.<sup>75</sup>

71 *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, p. 38.

72 *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, p. 51.

73 Cf. Heimbach-Steins, 2015, p. 8.

74 *Laudato si'*, 2015, p. 89.

75 *Laudato si'*, 2015, p. 89.

A comprehensive approach to addressing this crisis must also take into account the cultural particularities of different peoples and regions – especially indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. In this context, Pope Francis introduces the concept of ‘cultural ecology’, which emphasises that ecology entails respect for cultural heritage in the broadest sense of the term.<sup>76</sup> The Pope sees the solution to the ecological crisis in a fundamental transformation of lifestyle and mindset, grounded in an awareness of the shared origin and destiny of all creation. He places particular emphasis on ecological education and spirituality.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned papal encyclicals, there exists a substantial body of official documents issued by the Catholic Church that address ecological concerns (for instance, the entirety of Chapter Ten of the ‘Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church’). Furthermore, numerous research initiatives (such as the ‘The Laudato Si’ Research Institute’) and practical undertakings are being launched either independently by the Vatican or in collaboration with other stakeholders (for example, the ‘Laudato Si’ Action Platform’).

### **5.2. The Orthodox Church**

A more systematic engagement with the ecological crisis within the Orthodox Church began in the mid-1980s, during preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council. Following initial discussions on ecology at the Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference held in Chambésy near Geneva, a series of inter-Orthodox consultations on environmental protection ensued. One such consultation took place on the island of Patmos in 1988, from which emerged an initiative that ultimately led Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I to issue the first Encyclical on the environment in 1989.<sup>78</sup> The Encyclical emphasises human responsibility for the contemporary ecological crisis: ‘The abuse by contemporary humanity of its privileged position within creation and of the Creator’s order ‘to have dominion’ over the earth (Gen. 1:28) has already led the world to the edge of apocalyptic self-destruction’.<sup>79</sup> Due to extreme rationalism and egocentricity, humanity behaves toward creation as an arbitrary ruler. In contrast, the Orthodox Church

‘continuously declares that humanity is destined, not to exercise power over creation, as if it were the owner of it, but to act as its steward, cultivating it in love and referring it in thankfulness, respect, and reverence to its Creator’.<sup>80</sup>

It is noteworthy that Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, already in his first Encyclical, refers to the model of ‘steward of creation’, which would later become one of the most prevalent frameworks for describing humanity’s relationship with nature, directly

76 *Laudato si’*, 2015, pp. 143–146.

77 *Laudato si’*, 2015. Chapter 6.

78 Cf. Chryssavgis, 2015, p. 6.

79 Chryssavgis, 2003, p. 37.

80 Chryssavgis, 2003, p. 38.

opposing the model of ‘proprietor and possessor’. In addition to theoretical reflections on the causes of the contemporary ecological crisis, Patriarch Dimitrios I also launched a practical initiative through this Encyclical: he proclaimed September 1st as the Day of Environmental Protection. On this day, special prayers are offered within the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the safeguarding and preservation of God’s creation.<sup>81</sup>

A significant impetus to Orthodox engagement with environmental issues was given by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who has led the Ecumenical Patriarchate since 1991. The most emblematic testimony to his efforts in environmental preservation is his informal title ‘the Green Patriarch’.<sup>82</sup>

Environmental concerns were also included on the agenda of the Pan-Orthodox Council (officially titled ‘The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’), which was held in 2016 on the island of Crete. The protection of the environment was addressed in three of the Council’s final documents. The most concise diagnosis of the causes of the contemporary ecological crisis, as well as a proposed solution, is found in the document ‘the Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’:

‘It is clear that the present-day ecological crisis is due to spiritual and moral causes. Its roots are connected with greed, avarice and egoism, which lead to the thoughtless use of natural resources, the filling of the atmosphere with damaging pollutants, and to climate change. The Christian response to the problem demands repentance for the abuses, an ascetic frame of mind as an antidote to overconsumption, and at the same time a cultivation of the consciousness that man is a ‘steward’ and not a possessor of creation’.<sup>83</sup>

As a means of overcoming the ecological crisis, the Orthodox Church first emphasises repentance for the sin of humanity’s distorted relationship with nature. This is followed by a fundamental transformation in humanity’s approach to creation – one no longer shaped by possessive and consumerist mentalities.<sup>84</sup> The result of repentance and the transformation of humanity’s relationship with nature must be asceticism – that is, restraint, self-limitation, and frugality – as a remedy for the consumerist mentality and human greed for natural resources and goods, which humanity is morally obliged to preserve for future generations.<sup>85</sup>

81 Cf. Chryssavgis, 2003, p. 38. This initiative was later joined by several Orthodox Churches and ecumenical church organizations, such as the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches.

82 Cf. *The Green Patriarch: His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*.

83 *Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, 2016, p. 8.

84 *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, 2016, p. 14.

85 *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World*, 2016, p. 10.

Drawing upon these conciliar texts, as well as other Orthodox writings that address ecological concerns,<sup>86</sup> it becomes evident that the ecological crisis is not merely an ethical issue, but a profoundly theological and existential one. Accordingly, engagement with ecology, for the Orthodox Church, constitutes a faithful adherence to its own doctrine and tradition. Metropolitan John Zizioulas identifies two aspects of Orthodox theology as the most compelling testimony to this claim: the central place of the Eucharist (Divine Liturgy) in the life and teaching of the Orthodox Church, and the ascetic tradition. Designating humanity as the ‘Priest of Creation’, Metropolitan Zizioulas asserts that the human being is called to cultivate and transform the created world, offering it to God in gratitude – just as, in the Divine Liturgy, bread and wine are offered to God.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, the ascetic tradition precisely points humanity toward this vocation, liberating it from a selfish and possessive attitude toward nature.<sup>88</sup>

### ***5.3. Churches of the Reformation and Ecumenical Movement***

One of the distinctive features of contemporary ecological awareness within the churches of the Reformation is that it is often expressed through engagement in the ecumenical movement, in which Reformation churches have played a significant role since the very beginnings of its development in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although environmental protection was not unknown to earlier theological thought, following the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961 – which laid the theological foundations for later ecological initiatives – and especially from the early 1970s and the ‘discovery of ecology’, the World Council of Churches became one of the key actors in the ecological movement. The WCC was among the first to formulate the principle of ‘sustainability’ – at a conference in Bucharest in 1974 and later at its General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 – thus influencing political debates on the subject.<sup>89</sup> During the 1980s, the World Council of Churches also developed the concept of ‘Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation’ as a theological and practical response to the global crises of the time, including ecological degradation, poverty, and discrimination.<sup>90</sup> This concept advocates an integral approach and does not separate the spiritual from the social; rather, it affirms that Christian life in the contemporary world entails a commitment to justice, the promotion of peace, and the protection of the environment – three dimensions that are intrinsically interconnected. The ‘Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation’ framework was later adopted as a programmatic orientation by the World Council of Churches and is promoted through education, public engagement, and ecological initiatives. Among the practical responses to the ‘Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation’ call is the ‘Season of

86 Cf. for example *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2000, p. 13; *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, 2020, p. 8.

87 Cf. Zizioulas, 2003, p. 8; Zizioulas, 2011, pp. 133–141.

88 Cf. Zizioulas, 2003, pp. 8–9.

89 Cf. Stückelberger, 2015, p. 12.

90 Cf. Preman Niles, 1994.

Creation’, held annually from September 1 to October 4<sup>91</sup> which includes ecological actions, educational programs, prayers for the created world, etc.

In addition to their ecological engagement through ecumenical organizations, the churches of the Reformation have also articulated their own positions on ecology through various documents. In 1993, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America issued the statement ‘Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice’, in which it emphasises that, although the Church participates in political, economic, and scientific discussions on ecology, care for the planet is fundamentally a spiritual matter.<sup>92</sup> ‘Creation – Not For Sale’ was one of the three sub-themes of the main theme ‘Liberated by God’s Grace’, which marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation and was organised by the Lutheran World Federation in 2017.

In 2004, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted the Accra Confession, which affirms that faith and justice are inseparable – that the struggle against economic and ecological injustice is a matter of faith in Christ, not merely a social, political, or ethical concern. This statement strongly condemns the consumerist mentality, greed, and selfishness, which result in the devastation of the environment.<sup>93</sup> Among the practical initiatives that have received significant attention in ecumenical and ecological circles is the ‘Decade for Climate Justice’. On December 1, the World Communion of Reformed Churches officially launched the ‘Decade for Climate Justice’ with the aim, among other things, of raising awareness about the urgency of climate action and fostering solidarity with communities affected by climate change. The impact of this initiative is further highlighted by the fact that, on June 21, 2025, the World Council of Churches officially inaugurated the Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to global initiatives, numerous ecological movements and projects exist at the local level. One such initiative is ‘Eco-Congregation Hungary’ of the Reformed Church of Hungary, which promotes ethical and sustainable practices within local communities, with particular emphasis on environmental preservation, education, and practical projects.<sup>95</sup> The Reformed Church in Hungary is also an active member of the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), which aims to facilitate the exchange of experiences in ecological engagement and to encourage joint witness in caring for the created world.

91 Cf. Season of creation: ‘September 1st was proclaimed as a day of prayer for the environment by the late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I in 1989. The Orthodox Church year starts that day with a commemoration of how God created the world. On 4 October, Roman Catholics and other churches from the Western traditions commemorate Francis of Assisi, known to many as the author of the Canticle of the Creatures.’

92 Cf. Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice, 1993, p. 1.

93 Cf. Accra Confession.

94 Cf. World Council of Churches Launches Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action, 2025.

95 Cf. Perry, 2003.

## 6. Conclusion

In this book chapter, the main approaches to the relationship between the environment and human rights have been presented, including the analysis of the most important benefits and shortcomings of each approach. Considering the overall picture, it can be concluded that procedural environmental rights, together with two approaches to substantive right to environment of particular quality should be considered as complementary, compatible and mutually reinforcing. Not only are the procedural environmental rights compatible with the substantive right to environment, but they can contribute to its efficiency as well. Furthermore, the recognition of a standalone human right to an environment of particular quality does not preclude the ongoing process of the ‘greening’ of human rights. On the contrary, the interconnection and intersection of different human rights have become hallmark features of contemporary human rights systems, and therefore, recognising a standalone right to the environment can strengthen the greening of other human rights.

The recognition of the legal personality of the nature and its objects, even though it is an interesting and provocative path towards the legal protection of the environment, does not contribute to the relationship between environment and human rights. In such cases some rights of these legal persons are explicitly recognised, however, it cannot be concluded that they are endowed with all the human rights or that they can contribute to the recognition of the standalone right of human beings to an environment of particular quality.

The proposal to recognise a standalone right to the environment based on the NIC theory of law fits within the broader approach of establishing a substantive, standalone human right to an environment of particular quality. However, it is an advanced theoretical proposal grounded on firm theoretical foundations, whereas similar proposals have mostly reflected and resulted from practical needs for environment protection.

The discourse on the moral foundations of the right to environment moves in the same direction. As has been demonstrated, the moral demand for a healthy environment meets the threshold conditions to qualify as the basis of a human right.

In conclusion, the initiative to recognise a standalone right to an environment of particular quality dominates recent scholarship, and it is likely that this important right will be universally recognised in the future. Nevertheless, its theoretical foundations require further development, as most existing proposals justify their claims primarily through practical implications without sufficiently engaging with established human rights theories.

Given the contemporary positions of Christian Churches on ecological issues, it is evident that Lynn White Jr.’s assertion – that the theology of certain Christian traditions contributed to legitimising an exploitative attitude toward nature – no longer reflects present-day reality. Despite certain (though not particularly significant) differences in their approaches to ecology, all Christian Churches, grounded in

biblical foundations, emphatically affirm that creation is the work of God and, as such, deserves reverence and protection.

Nature is not merely a backdrop for human existence; rather, having been created as good and bearing significance within God's salvific plan, it possesses intrinsic value. The current theological perspectives of Christian Churches on ecology, along with their practical initiatives and active engagement in environmental protection, demonstrate not only an awareness of these truths but also a readiness to advocate vigorously for the respect and preservation of nature.

The sheer number of environmental initiatives launched by churches today is virtually immeasurable. Furthermore, when considering the theoretical contributions of Christian Churches to ecological discourse, one should highlight their integral approach – an understanding that ecology and environmental protection cannot be viewed in isolation from economic, political, cultural, and other societal factors.

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