

The ecotheology of Philip Sherrard

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It is generally accepted that ecology is one of the greatest challenges of our days and will probably play an important role in the immediate future. Indeed, as the evidence of an imminent future catastrophe is constantly growing, the search for alternatives to industrial growth intensifies¹. Ecology as a political movement, at least in its “deep ecology” version, is in many ways more radical than the ideologies of socialism, feminism, and fascism, because it attempts to establish a way of being radically different from that prevailing in the societies it seeks to influence². In addition, it is a common perception that ecological concerns go hand in hand with a self-critique of Western civilization, which may be directed against the more recent past of fossil fuel-induced prosperity³, still, sometimes it becomes more radical⁴, questioning some of its elementary structures.

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1. A. Heywood, *Πολιτικές ιδεολογίες*, transl. Char. Koutris, Epikentro Publications, Athens 2007, p. 505. Heywood, argues, that the most important subcategories of political ecology are right-wing economics, eco-socialism, eco-anarchism, and eco-feminism. (*op. cit.*, p. 495). Although contemporary ecological movements are more often leaning on the left, ecological trends initially appeared under a right-wing orientation. (*op. cit.*, p. 496).

2. *Op.cit.*, p. 507.

3. A typical example of this trend is the recent book by UN chiefs Christiana Figueres and Tom Carnac-Rivett on the Paris Agreement negotiations (2015), with the somewhat optimistic title: *Τὸ μέλλον ποὺ ἐπιλέγουμε* (*The Future We Choose*), Ikaros Publishing, Athens 2021. The book’s authors call for reducing the use of fossil fuels, and various other, sometimes drastic, everyday changes in our lives that will prevent ecological collapse. More importantly, the authors also expect the situation to improve thanks to scientific and technological progress, which will allow us to one day massively use, for example, electric cars, thus avoiding the environmental pollution that is happening now.

4. A typical example of this second trend is a famous work written in 1913 by the

The outline of an ecological thinker of this type will be discussed in this article. This is the important and “iconoclastic” 20th-century thinker, the orthodox British translator and writer Philip Sherrard⁵. Let it be noted here first that the well-known gospel saying about the five “sparrows”⁶, has a double meaning: on the one hand, God lovingly provides for all His creatures; on the other hand, man is the crown of creation. The theological doctrine that man is an *imago Dei*, has been seen as giving humans “absolute authority over nature, with the world being nothing more than a set of resources to be explored and exploited by humans”⁷. It is an established belief of Christian “mystics” that God is ever present in all creation, even in plants and trees⁸. Therefore, attempts for the

German vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, considered by many to be the first “modern” ecological manifesto. According to the conservative ecologist Klages, who is much more pessimistic and radical than Figueres and Carnac-Rivett, Christianity is the deepest reason why nature lost its sanctity and was taken over by man, who unified the individual pagan deities into one and only one, bringing himself into the foreground with the idea of progress. L. Klages, *Ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἡ γῆ*, transl. G. Stefanidis, Magma Publications, Athens 2020, *passim*. It should also be noted that no immediately applicable proposals are made here, nor is there room for hope for future scientific or technological innovation. For an equally radical ecological proposal, in the context of eco-anarchism this time, see M. Bookchin, *Τί εἶναι ἡ κοινωνικὴ οἰκολογία*, transl. Mak. Korakianitis, Vivliopolis Publications, Athens 2000, *passim*, where environmentalism is opposed by “social ecology” because authoritarian behavior towards nature is a product of our hierarchical social organization.

5. A first contact with Sherrard’s personality can be obtained from the interview he gave (25.3.1995) to female students of Lake High School, available on: <https://antifono.gr/serrarnt/> [5.7.2022], as well as by watching the following, relatively short, documentary: *Philip Sherrard: Ὁ δικός μας ξένος*, where various people who have lived and/or worked with him in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v92KeLm7EA>.

6. Luke 12, 6-7

7. M. Vernon, *Θεός: ὅλα ὅσα ἔχουν σημασία*, transl. G. Barouxis, Minoas Publications, Athens 2013, pp. 108-109.

8. St. Fanning, *Οἱ μυστικοὶ τῆς χριστιανικῆς παράδοσης*, transl. Theodora Darviri, Enalios Publications, Athens 2005, p. 454. As for the Orthodox ascetic tradition in particular, there we find many examples of naturalism: for example, Saint Seraphim of Sarov appeared to live in harmony with wild beasts and once fed a bear with his hand, as did Saints Sergius of Radonezh and Athanasia (Anastasia Logacheva). See Fanning, *Οἱ μυστικοὶ τῆς χριστιανικῆς παράδοσης*, *op.cit.*, pp. 129, 113-114 and 134. The philanthropic attitude of the Saints of the Orthodox tradition, in combination with its established position that man is superior to them because he was created in the image of God, is documented in K. Ware, *Ἐχθροὶ ἢ φίλοι: τὸ σῶμα, ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὰ πάθη*

development of a Christian-based “eco-theology” are based on biblical passages emphasizing that the world must be carefully managed⁹. Contemporary hierarchs also express their concerns on ecological issues:

The Church cannot remain indifferent to the problems raised by the ecological crisis, which is becoming an increasingly critical threat to the very existence of human civilization. It is important for us not simply to repeat the very worrying assessments of secular experts and ecological activists, but to offer our own, deeper approach to this worrying issue, rooted in the understanding of the world and the role of man in it according to the Bible¹⁰.

But what is the relationship between ecology (or the destruction of the environment) and science? Today it is widely accepted that science, the “offspring” of the combination of ancient Greek rationalism with Renaissance experimental knowledge¹¹, is characterized by methodological naturalism, that is, it has as its rule to seek only natural/material causes and –therefore– any non-physical data are programmatically excluded from its research¹². This means that, although science cannot speak about God’s existence or life after death, it aims to find naturalistic explanations for natural phenomena¹³. Of course, the great development of the natural sciences went hand in hand with their definitive

τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, transl. Polyxeni Tsaliki-Kiosoglou, En plo Publications, Athens 2014, pp. 72 and 76-78. The author also takes a bold position, arguing that the Bible does not definitively rule out the prospect of immortality for the animals (Ware, *Ἐχθροὶ ἢ φίλοι...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 69-73.

9. M. Vernon, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

10. Cyril (Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia), *Ἐλευθερία καὶ εὐθύνη: τὰ δικαίωματα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ ἡ ἀξία τοῦ προσώπου*, transl. Angeliki Peloriadou, En plo Publications, Athens 2011, p. 50.

11. M. Weber, *Ἡ ἐπιστήμη ὡς ἐπάγγελμα*, transl. Io. Sykoutris, Kouloura Publications, Athens 1933, pp. 67 and 69-70.

12. This is distinct from philosophical naturalism, which goes even further by arguing that the only real causes are the natural ones. E. C. Scott, *Ἐξέλιξη VS Δημιουργία: ἡ διαμάχη τῆς ἐξελικτικῆς θεωρίας καὶ τοῦ δημιουργισμοῦ*, transl. Laokratia Lakka, Kedros Publications, Athens 2009, p. 106.

13. See for example St. Weinberg, *Πῶς νὰ ἐξηγήσουμε τὸν κόσμο: τὸ ταξίδι γιὰ τὴν ἀνακάλυψη τῆς σύγχρονης ἐπιστήμης*, transl. Emilia-Alexandra Kritikou, Ropi Publications, Thessaloniki 2016, p. 29.

separation from theology in the 18th century¹⁴. As we will see below, Sherrard's ecological approach depends on his belief that the divine is directly encountered in nature, from which his criticism of modern man's "scientific" way of treating the latter derives. We believe this approach could be called "eco-theology" since it offers a theological basis for the environment and man's relationship with it. In particular, Philip Sherrard formulates his reflections at a time when the Chornobyl nuclear accident and its global consequences are a pressing issue. But let us follow the British author's reflections in more detail.

To begin with, Sherrard argues that, precisely because of the intensive training to which they are subjected and which usually monopolizes their time, scientists today are mostly unaware of their work's historical and philosophical presuppositions¹⁵. It is mainly artists and thinkers, such as Blake, Yeats, Eric Gill, and David Jones, among many others, who have deeply grasped how utilitarian and technocratic society represses man's "poetic" tendencies and dehumanizes him¹⁶. According to Sherrard, practicing a science requires an implicit or unconscious assumption of a metaphysical strain first fully formed with the 17th-century scientific "revolution"¹⁷. People like Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo, formed a way of observing the natural world as if it were simply a machine, which can be described in mathematical terms and lead us into experiments, with the main aim of submitting it to our intentions¹⁸.

14. Weinberg, *Πῶς νὰ ἐξηγήσουμε τὸν κόσμος...*, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

15. "For someone to be distinguished in any of the modern scientific disciplines requires the possession of such a vast amount of purely technical - mathematical and mechanical - information and practice, that the ambitious scientist is obliged to devote, almost exclusively, all the years between the beginning of his high school studies and the end of his university studies to acquire it. This means that he has little or no time in these crucial formative years -and probably even less later in his professional life- to devote himself to the pursuit of a completely different order of knowledge, that of the world of ideas -or of metaphysical and philosophical principles- by which his thought and practice as a scientist is determined at every steps he makes - even if he is unaware of it". Ph. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως: διερεύνηση τῶν ἀρχῶν καὶ τῶν συνεπειῶν τῆς σύγχρονης ἐπιστήμης*, transl. Io. Roilidis, Domos Publications, Athens 1995, pp. 10-11; cf. also pp. 9 and 101.

16. *Op.cit.*, p. 113.

17. *Op.cit.*, pp. 80 and 85-87.

18. *Op.cit.*, p. 79. Sherrard believes that every scientific experiment is exercising "violence"

Considering mathematics as a language in which everything can be expressed, Europe created mathematical physics, which triggered a huge sequence of technical discoveries and inventions, changing the whole planet¹⁹. In this context, God was of course seen as the “engineer”, the creator of this machine, but it was considered that after finishing His creation, He distanced Himself from it²⁰. The older and Christian concept, according to which nature is where the divine manifests itself, was set aside, giving way to Mechanism and the demand for ever more accurate predictions. Thus, because of these theological changes, the world finally lost its sacredness and de-sacralized²¹. But what came out of this? The modern industrialized and highly technocratic world in which we live²². This applies not only to Westerners but also to Africans, Asians, and all other civilizations, who, according to Sherrard, are in even greater danger of being alienated by these conditions, compared to Westerners, since they have not “born” them through the historical course of their civilization, as Westerners have, but have received them from outside²³. Modern perception has long since learned to orient itself

onto things. Philip Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», transl. Katerina Polidaki, *Παλίμψηστον/Palimpseston* 16 (1996), p. 29.

19. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 127. Indeed, the mechanistic approach of intellectuals like Descartes vehemently rejected the Renaissance “magical” views; these intellectuals believed that nothing completely hidden exists in nature, and confidently demanded mystery’s replacement by a full understanding of natural phenomena. The world is a “machine” made up of physical bodies, moving by natural necessity. Based on this principle, Mechanism formed the framework within which scientific research in the 17th century necessarily have taken place. R. S. Westfall, *Ἡ συγκρότηση τῆς σύγχρονης ἐπιστήμης: μηχανισμοὶ καὶ μηχανικὴ*, transl. Krinio Zisi, P.E.K, Herakleion 2008, especially pp. 42-46, 48, 54-55, 59; cf. and pp. 167-169.

20. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 87.

21. *Op.cit.*, p. 135. Sherrard, far from being the only one who historically relates the modern scientific revolution to scholasticism, mentions the book by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, entitled *Science and the Modern World*, to which he refers for the authentication of the connection between Christian theology and the 17th-century mechanistic-scientific spirit. *Op.cit.*, p. 143.

22. *Op.cit.*, pp. 122-123.

23. *Op.cit.*, p. 10. The conservative German sociologist Hans Freyer raises the question of how modern science and industrialization will interact with the cultural traditions of various non-European peoples, given that the latter did not “create” science and industrialization within their own culture, but simply received them from outside.

toward the purely material aspects of reality, for which there is strictly “empirical evidence” and the possibility of quantification and expression in mathematical terminology²⁴:

Modern science –whose very birth and development presupposes that it ignores the sacred aspect of nature– tries to fill the gap it has created by producing mathematical schemes whose only role is to help us manipulating and mastering matter on its own level, the exclusively quantitative one. The natural world, perceived as dead matter, is transformed into a scene where man exploits it for purely practical, utilitarian and predatory purposes with unbridled fury [...]. This is the reason why the application of science –in fact it is not about the application of science but of incredible ignorance– has caused such an imbalance, ugliness and even destruction, not only in the natural world but also in the lives of people²⁵.

Sherrard explains that:

The world of modern science –which includes the world of the craftsmen that developed within it– is a unique set of interdependencies, in which it is impossible to isolate one element as if it were totally independent of the others [...]. If you

However, unlike Sherrard, Freyer argues that, contrary to the Europeans, who brought industrialization and “modernization”, with whatever sacrifices the latter implied for their cultural values, other peoples received them ready-made, thus retaining more cultural/spiritual reserves in their own right. H. Freyer, *Τεχνοκρατία και οὐτοπία: θεωρία της σύγχρονης εποχής στη Δύση*, transl. K. Koutsourelis, Nefeli Publications, Athens 1998, pp. 268-270. One incident, maybe somewhat bizarre, vividly illustrates how technological development can go hand in hand with the ancient ritual practices of non-European cultures: in 1981, several bus drivers in Kathmandu sacrificed their bikes by sprinkling them with blood and decorating them with flowers. St. J. Tambiah, *Μαγεία, έπιστήμη, θρησκεία και τὸ φάσμα της ὀρθολογικότητας*, transl. Fot. Terzakis, Heridas Publications, Athens 2014, p. 284.

24. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», op.cit., p. 9.

25. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, op.cit., pp. 129-130. A similar observation is made by the sociologist Georg Simmel: “The modern spirit is becoming increasingly calculative. The ideal of physical science—to transform the world into a numerical example, to express every part of it in mathematical operations—is mirrored by the calculative precision of practical life, which has been brought about by the money economy”; G. Simmel, *Μητροπολιτική αἴσθηση*, transl. Ioanna Meitani, Agra Publications, Athens 2017, p. 36. Similar observations can also be found in Sombart, see W. Sombart, *Ὁ Ἀστός: πνευματικὲς προϋποθέσεις καὶ ἱστορικὴ πορεία τοῦ δυτικοῦ καπιταλισμοῦ*, transl. K. Koutsourellis, Nefeli Publications, Athens 1998, pp. 331 and 333.

wish a product, a car for example, you have to suffer all the consequences, from the abandoned oil fields, refineries and motorways, to the poisonous lead, carbon monoxide and noise that destroy the life of our cities, and the deadly boredom of those whose job it is to assemble the machines²⁶.

If de-sacralization took place within our Christian societies, one thinks perhaps there is an element within Christian theology that has benefited it spiritually. If the cause of the world's de-sacralization and its consequent trampling is the emergence of modern mechanistic philosophy and science, the deeper root is theological²⁷. Sherrard's critique does not stop at industrialization and the environment's consequent destruction; it goes further, to the rise of modern natural science which mathematized and "mechanized" the natural world; he considers that its deepest root is the theological position formulated in the Late Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas, despite that it had been already germinated in St. Augustine's writings: the substitution of Platonic for Aristotelian terminology in theological formulation²⁸. The deepest root of the world's mechanization is therefore theological and depends on two key names: Augustine and Aquinas. More specifically, Sherrard locates the roots of our desacralized world in the theology of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the former because of his pessimistic anthropology, the latter because he adopted Aristotelian ideas. If Augustine made a serious mistake, Aquinas continued it unintentionally, driving it to the edge. More specifically, in his attempt to refute Pelagius's heresy, Augustine claimed that man and

26. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 112. It is likely that Sherrard was also influenced by the technology theorist Jacques Ellul, whom he cites on occasion. Cf. J. Ellul, *Τὸ τεχνικὸ σύστημα*, transl. G. D. Ioannidis, Alistou Mnimis Publications, Athens 2012, espec. pp. 213-214, 216-219, 221-222 and 226. It is noteworthy that the computer and the digital world –so central to Ellul's thought– are not the focus of particular attention in Sherrard's work, which directs its critique primarily toward heavy industry. The autonomy of technology from the human being is also observed by the Russian religious philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, who exerted influence on both Sherrard and Ellul. See N. Berdyaev, *Τὸ νόημα τῆς Ἱστορίας*, transl. Sot. Dimopoulos, Enallaktikes Ekdoseis Publishing House, Athens 2021, p. 222. Sherrard cites Berdyaev's view that only Christianity made the positive sciences and technology possible – an assertion he appears to accept, albeit without clarifying to what extent..

27. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 122-123.

28. *Op.cit.*, pp. 61-62. Cf. also Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, p. 12.

all created beings “appeared” (not created) as ideas of God, from Whom they are ontologically separated. Man was created based on God’s idea of him, yet he as a natural being cannot unite with the divine, but only receive divine grace externally, through his thought²⁹. However, after the fall of the first created into sin, man was deprived of even this possibility and was perverted to such an extent that he deserved eternal damnation³⁰. The only possible redemption rests in the sacraments – formal rituals with a forensic role–, the purifiers of the “perverted” human nature³¹. Sherrard points out a great paradox: this man, who had fallen in love with God and lived in the enthusiasm of the divine presence, built a theological system that completely denies it³².

29. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 22-23.

30. Sherrard explains that the idea of hell as a place of torment and punishment constructed by God to “house” the damned souls who are worthy of it is not orthodox but derives directly from Roman Catholic theology. Actually, says Sherrard, hell represents not a place of torment but a painful way of being deprived of love, joy, and association with others. See his letter to the poet George Seferis (2.11.1966), in: Denise Harvey-Sherrard (ed.), “This dialectic of blood and light/George Seferis – Philip Sherrard/an exchange: 1947-1971”, transl. Anast. Theofillogiannakos, ed. Denise Harvey, Limni Evia 2015), in: <https://antifono.gr/%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%AE-%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85-%CF%86%CE%AF%CE%BB%CE%B9%CF%80%CF%80%CE%BF%CF%85-%CF%83%CE%AD%CF%81%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%BD%CF%84-%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%BD-%CE%B3/?fbclid=IwAR3P1amiptxsNnNwqWyXaK9ROicpqjGcNgVvscCjUmnQEmKk4W1izFkcxBU> [5.7.2022].

31. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

32. *Op.cit.*, p. 22. The responsibility that Sherrard attributes to Saint Augustine for the perversion of the genuine Orthodox ethos is reminiscent in many ways of Christos Giannaras’s theology, whom he seems to have influenced (let us recall here that Sherrard’s works were published in Greek by Athena Publications, in the context of the series “Synoro”, which Giannaras directed). See indicatively the latter’s book *Europe was Born from the “Schism”*, Ikaros Publishing, Athens 2014, pp. 127, 140, 145, and 163-168, as well as Chr. Giannaras, *Γιὰ τό «νόημα» τῆς πολιτικῆς*, Ikaros Publishing, Athens 2019, p. 135, where it is typically said that: “Europe is Augustine”. In general, the key difference between Sherrard and Giannaras is that the latter (especially in his mature work) paints a rather negative picture of nature as the dominance of impulsions and egoism in general, contrasting it with the relations of persons, where one exits from oneself to relate to the other. However, Sherrard makes clear that St. Augustine does not assert that man is not real at all; if he did that, he would have succumbed to pantheism, implying that everything is divine in itself. Sherrard, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

Nevertheless, the idea of man's, world's, and God's inter-embracing remained accepted and, at least until the 12th century, ecclesiastical writers formulated their theology in a Platonic language, i.e. they expressed their personal experiences of God's vision with concepts taken from the Platonic theory of *methexis*³³. However, from the 12th and especially the 13th century onward, Christian theology in the West stopped expressing experiences of God's vision. It adopted the Aristotelian thought, and its most prominent representative was the important philosopher Thomas Aquinas³⁴.

The beings in Aristotle do not participate in a higher and heavenly world, as Plato would have wanted; they are self-sufficient, individual, and self-reliable. Every substance in the universe is individual and there are no complex or participated substances³⁵. Therefore, the acceptance of Aristotelian ideas had serious consequences for Christian theology. At first, it forged its path together with –and reinforced– the implicit neglect of the neptic life's personal experiences by church writers, installing methods of abstract logic in the approach to theological questions³⁶. Moreover, there have been more direct theological consequences: According to Aristotelian thought, since every substance is absolutely individual, then Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection represent merely isolated historical events to which we cannot participate (e.g., through the sacraments)³⁷. This Aristotelian denial of participation obliged Aquinas to explain the Eucharist philosophically, with the notorious doctrine of "transubstantiation"; according to it, bread, and wine are destroyed as substances by consecration, and are replaced by the divine body and blood. In this way, however, the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Christ were seen as events that were repeated every time *ab initio* (since, in Aristotelian terms, we cannot "participate" in a different way in something that happened once and

33. *Op.cit.*, pp. 56-57 and 59-60.

34. *Op.cit.*, pp. 66. Of course, Sherrard admits that there are some exceptions – e.g. the German mystics Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius. See Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

35. *Op.cit.*, pp. 62-63.

36. *Op.cit.*, p. 61.

37. *Op.cit.*, pp. 64-65.

for all)³⁸. In this way, though, it is theologically recognized that man cannot finally be transformed into something else (be deified) without losing his nature, and that God can enlighten man; however, he is no longer regarded as a “mind” within himself³⁹.

In this way, Aquinas considers man not as a tri-substantial but a two-substantial being (soul, body). Thus, God’s separation from himself and the world is maximized⁴⁰. The world ceases to bear witness to God’s abiding presence⁴¹. But there is also something else in it. To avoid Aristotle’s monism and rescue immortality, Aquinas claims that the soul is a self-existent spiritual substance, inherently immaterial and incorruptible⁴². At the same time, to “rescue” nature from the negativity perceived by Augustine, Aquinas paradoxically ended up by completely removing the divine element from it, considering the world as somehow self-sufficient and fully knowable, through exclusively natural means⁴³. The Aquinas-scholastic view is that there are two sources of knowledge acquisition: faith and science; the former emanates from divine revelation and the latter is discovered by man through his reason. Thus, he introduced in the Christian world the division of human knowledge, which historically favored the process of secularization and gradually brought about the fragmentation and de-sacralization of the world around us⁴⁴. This schism gave us the impression that there are different levels of truth (“the fallacy of double truth”, as Sherrard calls it), a fact that has been progressively transferred from the cognitive to the moral field: The idea that there are multiple levels, each with its own truths, is today used to morally justify what is destructive to us and the environment, setting aside in a limited and private sphere whatever religious standards we have, to the extent that they run against them⁴⁵.

38. *Op.cit.*, pp. 65-66.

39. *Op.cit.*, p. 67.

40. *Op.cit.*, p. 68.

41. *Op.cit.*, pp. 70-71.

42. *Op.cit.*, pp. 73-74.

43. *Op.cit.*, pp. 139-140.

44. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν χάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, pp. 18-19.

45. *Op.cit.*, p. 21.

The idea that only this material world is the primary source of human knowledge, that started as a claim of the late medieval Scholastics, later evolved into the view that only this material world (i.e. stripped of its spiritual content and substratum) is the sole source of valid knowledge (i.e. science)⁴⁶. In this way, first the Europeans and then the other peoples, “materialized” all aspects of their civilizations⁴⁷. Then, came Descartes who, following Aquinas’s thought, considered the human soul complete from the beginning and related to the body, by forming it, like the form in other material (inanimate) objects⁴⁸. Therefore, the soul in Aquinas is already a complete substance and can exist without the body members, with which it is connected but does not need them to complete its nature⁴⁹. However, Descartes went further: he drew an absolute distinction between soul and body, conceiving the latter as a mechanism⁵⁰. Thus, all nature was eventually treated as an inanimate mechanism, which could be understood if quantified and expressed in abstract logical principles⁵¹. This is the role of mathematics. For Descartes and Galileo, mathematics had an exclusively worldly, secular function - revealing the principles of the inanimate nature’s operation⁵². Since then,

46. Op.cit., p. 17. Other thinkers have pointed out, like Sherrard, the late medieval philosophical theology’s decisive role in the emergence of modern physics. If, according to Heinz Heimsoeth, there is a substantial “break” in metaphysics, it is to be found in the late Middle Ages, especially in German mysticism’s nominalist tradition. Thinkers such as Meister Eckhardt, Silesius, and Jacob Boehme were the genuine sources of metaphysical renewal, which they fed with radical ideas inspired by their inner religious-mystical experiences. H. Heimsoeth, *Τὰ ἔξι μεγάλα ἐρωτήματα τῆς δυτικῆς μεταφυσικῆς καὶ οἱ ρίζες τῆς νεότερης φιλοσοφίας*, transl. M. Papanikolaou, P.E.K., Herakleion 2012, esp. pp. 53-68, 82-87 and 200-202. Let us note here that, although both attribute modern science’s roots to the late medieval theological ferment, Heimsoeths’s “heretical” approach gives primary historical importance not to scholasticism (as Sherrard does) but to German mysticism, while conceiving of modern science not negatively, as the violent destruction of nature, but primarily as a positive process of appreciating matter’s value.

47. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», op.cit.

48. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, op.cit., p. 76.

49. Op.cit., p. 72.

50. Op.cit., p. 77.

51. Op.cit.

52. Op.cit., p. 125. On the contrary, as Sherrard argues, Plato’s and Pythagoras’s involvement with mathematics had a deeply metaphysical meaning; they revealed a perfect and heavenly universe.

science's deepest ideal has been the grasping of all the natural world's processes⁵³. Thus, modern science emerged, whose main ideal was abstract and impersonal knowledge⁵⁴. For Sherrard, this 17th-century transformation is equivalent to humanity's second "original sin", a latent second "fall"⁵⁵, in which we all –wittingly or unwittingly– participate⁵⁶. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that this ideal was somehow "cracked", with the revolutionary discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics. Science came to recognize indeterminacy, necessarily admitting its inherent limits to the knowledge's acquisition, which can never be crystallized in a final and definitive form but is constantly subject to change and revision⁵⁷.

Nevertheless, mechanization and the de-sacralization of nature did not continue to occur and, in this respect, little has changed in practice (the old causality was replaced by a new, "statistical causality"). In Sherrard's words, the "cage" was not opened, it was just made bigger⁵⁸. Unlike in other historical periods, when people could (with practice) live in society without engaging in blasphemous activities, today each of us participates in some way in "sin" just by living in the present⁵⁹. Humanity is nowadays facing the danger of utter destruction and the only way for us to prevent it is to reverse the assumptions of the thinking that produces today's

53. *Op.cit.*, p. 127.

54. *Op.cit.*, p. 78.

55. Ph. Sherrard, *Οἱ πατέρες τῆς ἐρήμου καὶ ἐμεῖς*, transl. Io. Roilidis, (unpublished text), p. 60.

56. He asks himself: «Εἶναι δυνατόν ἡ χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ νὰ ἐνεργεῖ μέσα μας, ὅταν εἴμαστε καθισμένοι σ' ἓνα ἀεροπλάνο ἢ σ' ἓνα αὐτοκίνητο ποὺ ξερνᾷ δηλητήριο στὸν ἀέρα;» = "Is it possible for the grace of God to be at work within us while we are seated in an airplane or in a car that spews poison into the air?", (*op.cit.*, p. 61).

57. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 100-101. It is no coincidence, he says, that the most important and innovative persuasive ideas of the modern world are "evolution" («ἐξέλιξη»), "relativity" («σχετικότητα») and "indeterminacy" («ἀπροσδιοριστία»), (*op.cit.*, pp. 96-97).

58. *Op.cit.*, p. 97. However, Sherrard adds, the "revolutions" in physics in the 20th century have the beneficial quality of demonstrating its limited potential to offer us more than possible explanations, by relating each part of the universe to the others (*op.cit.*, pp. 97-98).

59. Sherrard, *Οἱ πατέρες τῆς ἐρήμου καὶ ἐμεῖς*, *op.cit.*, pp. 59-61.

techno-scientific “hell”⁶⁰. So, what could be the solution? Could there be a different way of life for modern man, that would perhaps resemble the ascetics’ exodus into the wilderness in the first Christian centuries? No, only for a few, Sherrard answers. Even if such an “escape” from the modern world and its ills were possible, it would be a recipe for spiritual destruction for someone to depart to become an ascetic without having the special call of God for such a decision⁶¹. Even our participation in the Church sacraments for communion with God tends to be altered by technological interventions: The temples are artificially lit by electricity and the bells are also electric⁶², while even the bread and wine, which are used today in the Eucharist, are goods produced in such way that violate nature, so they have nothing to do with what the Lord called his “body” and “blood”⁶³. Can we find a true “antidote” then to such decadence as the one outlined by Sherrard? He seems to believe that, insisting that true knowledge, which is spiritual wisdom, does not tolerate the slightest specialization⁶⁴, nor is it something that resides outside of us, that remains to be discovered. Instead, it is within us but it has been forgotten; the only way to regain access to it is to adopt what Sherrard calls the attitude of “non-knowledge”⁶⁵, this is not mere ignorance, but an inner self-memory call of the divine wisdom, that does not come as and when we will it, but can only be experienced on the condition that we are willing to adapt it in practice, in opposition to our modern lives’ basic rhythms (nature’s destruction)⁶⁶. By following such a spiritual discipline (it is obvious that, in this case, Sherrard thinks of Christian Orthodox spirituality), we may succeed in stopping our inner fragmentation. However, it is an undisputable fact that our reasoning is

60. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, p. 5.

61. Sherrard, *Οἱ πατέρες τῆς ἐρήμου καὶ ἐμεῖς*, *op.cit.*, pp. 61-62.

62. *Op.cit.*, p. 64.

63. *Op.cit.*, p. 65.

64. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, p. 29.

65. *Op.cit.*, p. 30.

66. *Op.cit.*, p. 27. “They say the world can’t last beyond 20-40 years. It cannot. It will be destroyed. It’s true, the world is in danger. It is a question of whether it will be around in 30 or 40 years, I don’t know. The world is in danger. And we must not remain silent”. This is what Sherrard said in an interview of his taken by pupils (25.3.1993), that is available in the link: <https://antifono.gr/serrarnt/> [5.7.2022].

based on certain preconditions, which are not in general terms unrelated to our inner spiritual state⁶⁷. Every scientific attempt starts unknowingly from such foundations, which it takes as data, to solve the problems it poses⁶⁸. In Sherrard's words: "This means that we have to free ourselves from the idea that what we have been taught during the last centuries –to consider knowledge really constitutes knowledge–, as well as from the idea that knowledge can be acquired in ways that we think we can acquire it"⁶⁹.

More specifically, Sherrard's proposal consists of three important pillars: firstly, he emphatically argues, that it must be more widely understood that knowledge can never be neutral. On the contrary, it depends to a large extent on the intellectual preconditions of the person who acquires it: if he has a false and evil image of the world, then his knowledge will also bear the traces of this image⁷⁰. The argument is that knowledge should be neutral and that it should not be neutral. Then, an a priori acceptance of the possibility of spiritual knowledge is necessary, one that is placed above all scientific endeavor as its foundation and presupposes divine revelation⁷¹. Finally, the third and most important principle is that the fundamental ideas of a religious tradition should constitute the conceptual framework within which any science will operate⁷². If, as Heraclitus said, «κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὦτα βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἔχόντων» ("Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for people who have barbaric souls")⁷³, then we ought to purify our sensory organs so that they cease to be "bad witnesses"⁷⁴. Sherrard proposes a "mystical" understanding and nature's treatment as a divine

67. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», op.cit., pp. 6-8.

68. Op.cit.

69. Op.cit., p. 29. Sherrard's critique does not escape even the priests, whose preaching is characterized as an aggressive "bombardment" of moral, social, and even warlike content, completely incompatible with the content of the Mass.

70. Sherrard, Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως..., op.cit., p. 152.

71. Op.cit., pp. 153-154.

72. Op.cit., p. 154.

73. See H. Diels-W. Kranz, *Οἱ Προσωκρατικοί: οἱ μαρτυρίες καὶ τὰ ἀποσπάσματα*, vol. A', Papadima Publications, Athens 2011, 175 (Fragm. 107).

74. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», op.cit., pp. 15 and 7.

manifestation⁷⁵. Its key element is recognizing Christ's divine-human nature, in which the divine is united in absolute degree with the human, sanctifying it. This is the Incarnation⁷⁶ and this is what happens with the divine sacraments, such as Holy Communion, which for the Orthodox is not a process of "transubstantiation", but a real appearance of Christ, in which the communicants participate⁷⁷. For the Orthodox tradition, man is not two-dimensional, as we think, but three-dimensional⁷⁸. The three elements of which he was considered to be composed were the body, the soul, and the "mind"⁷⁹. Mind it's nothing else than man's spiritual

75. *Op.cit.*, p. 28.

76. For Christ's incarnation as the complete union of the divine nature with the human, see Kallistos Ware's book, *Ὁ Ὁρθόδοξος δρόμος*, transl. Maria Pasxou, Heptalofos Publications, Athens 1984, p. 86.

77. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 65. Cf. and H. Alfeyev, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως: εἰσαγωγή στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη θεολογία*, transl. Angeliki Peloriadou, En plo Publications, Athens 2014, p. 244. As noted, the concept of mystery, which comes from the ancient Greek verb «μύω» and means "to close the eyes or the mouth", has in Orthodox theology the meaning of something that, in order to somehow understand it, it must be "revealed" to us, without ever being able to fully comprehend it. Its etymology, coming from the rituals of the ancient Greek mystery cults, where the newcomer was initially blindfolded and then opened his eyes and saw the objects of worship, expresses both revelation and concealment, which is representative of how God is approached according to Orthodox theology. Kallistos Ware *Ὁ Ὁρθόδοξος δρόμος*, *op.cit.*, pp. 20 and 87-89 for participation.

78. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, p. 47 and Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, pp. 14-17.

79. *Op.cit.*, p. 14. The theological idea that what the Church Fathers generally call "mind" is that part of the soul that is not identified with the intellect (i.e., the rational part/λογιστικόν), but can know God directly (i.e., by God's vision), is also discussed in Ware, *Ἐχθροὶ ἢ φίλοι*, *op.cit.*, pp. 63-69. According to the Church Fathers, once a person has been purified from his passions through ascesis, the mind's work is the divine presence's direct experience, while the work of the intellect is to express the mind's experience in logical propositions. F. Sxinas, «Οἱ γνωστικὲς δυνάμεις τῆς ψυχῆς κατὰ τὴν πατερικὴ διανόηση», *Ἑλληνικὴ Φιλοσοφικὴ Ἐπιθεώρηση/Helliniki Philosophiki Epitheorisi* 38, 114 (2021), pp. 206-209. Cf. also p. 213: "The Platonic ontological pair sense-intellect is replaced by the Christian ontological pair created-uncreated. The Platonic mind sees sensible light of the good's idea, while the Christian mind sees Divinity's uncreated light and the being's uncreated reason. If we examine this opposition from the Christian patristic point of view, we can observe two things: firstly, neither the mental-extrasensory, evaluated ontologically and morally, is necessarily good and superior to the sensible (e.g. Satan) nor the material-sensible is necessarily inferior to the mental (e.g. the Christ's body). Secondly, the created man acquires by grace uncreated organs in order to be able

vision – his ability to experience God⁸⁰. Of course, it is a faculty that is perhaps for most people in total inertia, to the point of being ignored⁸¹; yet, this is the realm where we can bring ourselves into contact with our creator God. Similarly, nature itself can be purified by divine grace; is not simply a tool we can use in any way we wish. For the Christian faith, there exists traditionally a distinction -not a dualism- between the natural and the supernatural/spiritual world, since the latter is mixed with, and “embedded” in it: each individual physical form expresses an archetype of the spiritual world⁸².

Criticism

First, it seems appropriate to question Philip Sherrard’s historical claims. A careful study of the history of modern science shows that his account is oversimplified. More particularly, it is well known and well documented that neither the historical transition from Aquinas’s scholasticism to Descartes’s mechanism and Galileo’s physics didn’t happen rapidly since Aquinas has been generally dominated the philosophical-theological discourse for about three centuries, nor was it immediate, since the criticism against him was experienced as a serious rupture both by its proponents, who were anxiously seeking new foundations for the physical world’s understanding, and by their opponents, who outrightly opposed them. From the 13th to the 16th century, we discern an attitude in the West that could be described as the natural sciences’

to know God’s uncreated glory, by becoming himself uncreated by grace”.

80. Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-40 and 47.

81. Sherrard, «Διότι εἶναι ἱερὸν κάθε τι ποὺ ζῇ», *op.cit.*, p. 15.

82. *Op.cit.*, p. 11. Sherrard believes that this particular mentality was preserved by the Orthodox tradition even though few people have acquired the spiritual level to experience it. See Sherrard, *Ὁ βιασμός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῆς φύσεως...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-27. According to Father Kallistos Ware, ecclesiastical writers are generally divided into those who disdained the body (“Platonists”, with Origen as the main representative) and those who, based directly on the Bible, understood man as a psychosomatic unity, honoring both body and matter (“hagiographical”, with St. Irenaeus as the main representative). Fr. Kallistos concludes that in the history of Christianity, the latter finally prevailed. Ware, *Ἐχθροὶ ἢ φίλοι*, *op.cit.*, pp. 120-132 and 150.

“subordination” to Christian theology⁸³. Science and philosophy were united and served together Christian doctrine’s purposes, harmonizing faith and reason within the framework of Scholasticism. In the 17th century, this system was “cracked” and the sciences diversified in an unprecedented and revolutionary way. The distinction (by Galileo) between the “Bible” (as a book) and the “book” of nature, based on the fact that the latter is written in a mathematical language, testifies to the separation of science and religion and the breakdown of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic model of the universe on which the medieval Catholic Church had based its dogmatic edifice⁸⁴. If this description is historically accurate, then the transition from the single world view to the secularization of science and the compartmentalization of our ideas about the world (e.g. physics, theology, philosophy) was not immediate and effortless, as it was presented by Sherrard, whose narrative neglects to explain why scholasticism remained strong for almost three centuries and modern science emerged only in violent conflict with it. The most important event that contributed to the demise of scholastic metaphysics was the establishment of mathematical physics, mainly by Galileo, at the beginning of the 17th century. Where Aristotelian science put forward “final causes”, Galileo began to seek natural laws; again, in the supercelestial space where the latter saw perfection, he would find the same causality that characterizes our own sublunary space. This differentiation had the characteristics of a rupture and cannot simply be seen as the scholastic theology’s continuation or consequence. In contrast to the Aristotelian science, which had been dominant until then and which identified “final causes” (purposes) in nature, the new science (called “natural philosophy”) was “mechanistic”: it saw the universe as a clock, a mechanism characterized by a divinely conceived harmony that could be described in mathematical terms⁸⁵. Moreover, historically speaking, between Aquinas’s medieval scholasticism and Modern mechanistic science, at least two crucial historical events were interposed, which

83. J. H. Brooke, *Ἐπιστήμη καὶ θρησκεία: μιὰ ἱστορικὴ προσέγγιση*, transl. Vassiliki Vakaki, P.E.K., Herakleion 2008, pp. 73 and 79.

84. *Op.cit.*, pp. 101-103.

85. *Op.cit.*, p. 77.

Sherrard completely overlooks to support his correlation (Aquinas's theological originality-mechanism-modern science): the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. Concerning the former, we know that it was characterized by a "naturalism" that essentially elevated the human psyche over nature, portraying the latter as a vast phantasmagoria of psychic powers; this attitude could probably be called "animistic", and in the 17th century had not yet disappeared and was maintained, especially in the "school" of chemists who were Paracelsus's followers. Van Helmont, an eminent disciple of this school, argued that everything is endowed with something like "perception", thanks to which they perceive which bodies are similar and which are alien to them, as well as "sympathies" and "antipathies"⁸⁶. The Renaissance worldview, closely linked to magic, took for granted that nature is a genuine mystery and the human mind will probably remain partly unfathomable. Her ideal was Faust, the scientist-magician who owes his knowledge to the natural world's implicit/irrational powers⁸⁷. The modern worldview had to wrestle with beliefs like those mentioned above before managing to be established. Sherrard also overlooks Protestantism and its influence on the development of modern physics and the consequent "mechanization" of the natural world, an influence seen as possibly more important than that of Catholicism⁸⁸.

Additionally, Sherrard's interpretation seems to take for granted that scientific development is the main culprit for secularization in the West; on the contrary, contemporary historians dispute this view⁸⁹. It

86. R. Westfall, *Η συγκρότηση της σύγχρονης έπιστήμης*, *op.cit.*, pp. 41-44. The most characteristic example of nature's "implicit/irrational" forces was considered to be magnetism.

87. *Op.cit.*, p. 42. See also J. Milbank's article, «Έπιστήμη, θρησκεία και μαγεία: ξαναγράφοντας την άτζέντα», in: S. Mitralaxis, P. Tyson and P. Harrison (eds.), *Πέρα από την έπιστήμη και τη θρησκεία: νέες φιλοσοφικές και ιστορικές προσεγγίσεις*, Ropi Publications, Thessaloniki 2020.

88. On this subject, apart from the well-known monographs by Merton and Weber, you can see the most recent analysis in P. Harrison, «Ό προτεσταντισμός και ή γένεση της έπιστήμης», in *op.cit.* Cf. and J. H. Brooke, *Έπιστήμη και θρησκεία: μιá ιστορική προσέγγιση*, *op.cit.*, espec. pp. 128-129 and 147-149. In his chapter on the subject, Brooke acknowledges that, in the 17th century, Protestantism, indirectly, contributed more to science, but insists that one should not be too hasty and exaggerate its contribution.

89. Contrary to the common prejudice that science inevitably leads to atheism, the

should also be pointed out that Sherrard's proposals for dealing with the destruction of nature are vague and unclear. Sherrard has insisted so much on the unacknowledged consequences of nature's "abuse", that he sees the latter as preventing man from being a Christian – yet this is precisely why he fails to propose any definitive escape from it for the great mass of people, probably knowing that the price of an eventual "exit" from the industrial system and rejection of science would be prohibitively high. Finally, Sherrard overlooks that science and technology have done much to reduce the dire consequences of their applications.

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historian of science John Hedley Brooke has repeatedly demonstrated that scientific discoveries about nature are, at the very least, open to differing philosophical conclusions. One such example, which Brooke presents in a lecture on the myths surrounding science and secularization, is the atomic theory. Indeed, when this idea –held by certain ancient pre-Socratic thinkers– returned to prominence and secured its place within science, some claimed that everything in the natural world could now be explained in terms of the movement of particles and the void, thereby rendering God unnecessary as an explanatory principle. On the other hand, the devoutly religious Francis Bacon (despite his rejection of the atomic theory) drew the opposite conclusion: he argued that the emergence of our world from a random distribution of atoms in space was so improbable that invoking God would be all the more necessary under atomism. We thus encounter two entirely opposing conclusions derived from the same scientific premise. Rather than viewing science as intrinsically linked to secularization, it would be more accurate to regard it as neutral with respect to the question of God's existence, since its theories have accommodated both theistic and naturalistic-atheistic philosophical interpretations. J. H. Brooke, «Μῦθος 25: ὅτι ἡ νεωτερικὴ ἐπιστήμη ἔχει ἐκκοσμικεύσει τὸν δυτικὸ πολιτισμό», in: R. Numbers (ed.), *Ὁ Γαλιλαῖος στὴ φυλακὴ: μῦθοι γιὰ τὴν ἐπιστήμη καὶ τὴ θρησκεία*, transl. Io. Plexidas, Logeion Publications, Trikala 2011, p. 244.

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