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Ecological challenges to ethics

Throughout centuries, human beings had diverse ideas of their relations to nature and assumed various attitudes to nature. However, this was invariably connected with the adoption of a certain moral code resulting from the assessment of the situation, noticeable threats and appearing expectations. These circumstances have led to the development of a hierarchy of values to be followed by members of communities. The formation of such hierarchies was relatively easy in homogeneous pastoral or farmer cultures, which are in constant contact with nature and depend on it. The situation was changed by the urban culture, which is detached from nature or even turns away from nature. Its precursor was Socrates, probably the first ostentatiously anthropocentric philosopher. Obviously one cannot say that Socrates directed the attention of philosophers to the peculiarity of human searching for their place in the world “behind the walls”, yet this is the fact worth mentioning. It should also

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be reminded that Socrates is considered to be the “father” of ethics, the peculiarly human domain, the domain which is hard to imagine without humans. They decide what is good or evil. Man is supposedly the only living being that wonders what happiness, love, responsibility, meaning of life signify. We may answer these questions differently, depending on our vision of the world and human beings. We make more or less conscious choices, we are free people who do not act upon impulse, we are people detached from nature, forced to think and use our minds.

Freedom is still a problem for us, a burden not many are able to bear. This is why people become so often enslaved by easy solutions, simple recipes for life, comfortable or easy to comprehend models of the world. So far, these visions were some kinds of maps that help people find themselves in the reality. Now, some of the previous visions are no longer valid and some changed the meanings of their elementary notions, so it is more and more difficult to notice what message they carried in the past. Currently, we witness the simultaneous existence of the visions of the Enlightenment philosophy followers, who perceive the world as a kind of a machine, and of the “naturalists” who also include some representatives of Deep Ecology perceiving the reality as one huge organism. There is also a post-modernist model of the world as chaos in which human existence remains accidental and devoid of meaning. The Christian vision of the world, recently reminded by pope Francis,² which emphasises the sanctity of the world and a special position of human beings in it, and visions of other religions are important here. It is obvious that the adopted world model is connected with a certain concept of man and to a considerable extent it determines our perception of obligations and possibilities towards the world and ourselves.

We simultaneously notice that along with new challenges social and political issues tend to change. Former debates of the left- and right-wing parties, conservatives, liberals, advocates of progress, anarchists, etc. are still continued but they are more and more detached from the appearing problems. In confrontation with these disputes, which are frequently idle, increased awareness of threats and common consent as to the need

² Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 2015.

to undertake definite ecological activities seem incredible but when we look more closely at the apparent unanimity of stances, we can notice a lot of considerable differences.

1. Increased ecological awareness

Unprecedented industrial development, progress in science and technology, intensification of people's production capacities and work efficiency have all led in the last two centuries to an inconceivable transformation of the world we live in. However, despite the visible increased affluence of a part of mankind, ill-considered exploitation of raw materials had brought about a lot of damage.³ Numerous ecological disasters, which have become more and more visible since the mid-19th century and which are more and more bothersome and threatening to life on our planet, are the objects of scientific research. Scientists noticing the occurring processes have been warning us for years about the upcoming threats. On the basis of this research that suggests the possibility of a global climate disaster, civic ecological movements began to appear. Numerous organizations, including the Catholic Church, started to speak loudly about the importance of environmental issues. It is worth reminding that Pope John Paul II made St. Francis of Assisi the patron of ecologists in 1979, in the second year of his pontificate, so that this saint would set an example and encourage others to ally themselves with all living beings. In the recent decades, in consequence of such activities, one begins to notice that the environment is a value equal to other values, such as work or capital, and in many cases it may have even greater value. Ecological issues are also more and more frequently raised in the international forum as the awareness of the need to organise and coordinate political, social and economic activities in order to restrict the consequences of environmental devastation also increases. The debate was

³ See i.e.: R. Carson, *Silent spring*, Boston 1962, P. Lymbery, I. Oakeshott, *Farmageddon: the true cost of cheap meat*, London 2014. Both books focus on describing ecological crisis caused by ill-exploitation of our natural environment.

initiated at the United Nations conference *Only One Earth* in Stockholm in 1972. The concept of sustainable development appeared there for the first time; “sustainable development meaning constant, balanced and self-sustaining development that involves economical use of the Earth’s natural resources to leave them for future generations in the condition at least the same as we have inherited from our ancestors.”⁴

The next United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was organised 20 years later in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. It saw the adoption of two documents: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Action programme – Agenda 21.

Also the Treaty on European Union passed in the same year mentions the support of sustainable development, with consideration given to environmental protection requirements, as one of the main tasks. The next step was the adoption of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy by the Council of Europe in 2001.

In 2002 the United Nations organised the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. As a result of the debates on sustainable development issues and construction of a fair community, the Millennium Development Goals were established. The Goals involved the matters of the management of water and energy resources, health, agriculture, biological diversity, finance, management, and trade.

During interdisciplinary debates, it was noted that there was a possibility of linking and solving environmental, energy-related and ethical problems. Also the industry saw its opportunities in the fact that renewable energy, recycling, better food management and related development of “pure” technologies and services may constitute profitable economy sectors guaranteeing income for businesses and jobs for many people.

We also notice increased awareness that the biosphere is an interactive entirety with all elements mutually linked. The noticing of the need to harmonise management with the laws of nature and human needs is a very positive fact. The ethical aspect focusing on responsibility for the environment in which the contemporary and future generations are to

⁴ M. Nowicki, *Polityka ekorozwoju Polski. Wyzwania stojące przed ludzkością w XXI wieku*, [in:] *Ziemia domem człowieka*, red. J. L. Krakowiak, Warszawa 1997, p. 61.

live and the need to respect the laws of nature deserves attention. The debate on “sustainable development” made it possible to link ecological, social, political, economic and ethical issues as well as to notice that economic, social and ecological goals can be realised without preference given to some at the expense of others.

A lot of important issues were discussed during the conference; for example, the need to limit material- and energy-consuming actions or excessive consumption. An attempt was made at determining the permitted quantitative consumption *per capita*. However, it is worth noting that during the debates held from 1970 to 2000, the concentration of CO² in the atmosphere increased faster (by half) than in the two previous centuries.

Some of the imposed regulations concerning, for example, the use of bio-fuels turned out to be harmful to many regions of the world, where we observed felling of trees for the purpose of growing plants used in the production of these bio-fuels or consolidation of soils, giving up previous cultivation and extensive areas of arable lands becoming barren subsequently, increased unemployment rate and famine. Some EU directives on environmental protection or energy saving are also controversial. One example may be the recent liquidation of traditional light bulbs, which are much more effective when light is switched on and off frequently and which are much easier to recycle than fluorescent lamps.

Ecology has led to a sort of mixing of stances – between the attitudes of Romanticism and Positivism. It would be difficult to use Mickiewicz’s concept of “lenses or learning” as lenses and learning, the tools of scientific analysis, do not have much in common with wisdom. The Positivistic attitude lost its wisdom having been stolen by technocrats, officials having no imagination, experts, analysts-accountants. As it uses instrumental rationality that shows the reality from a narrow perspective, it has lost the potential of holistic analysis and synthesis of the occurring processes and resulting dangers. It occurs as a paradox that the Romantic attitude turns out to be wiser in this conflict as contrary to the Positivistic mechanical philosophy and fatalism (everything is inevitable because it is subject to the laws of nature, statistical or other laws) it stimulates the imagination and sensitivity, so it opens up imagination and sensitiv-

ity, people's creative capacity of innovation and, most importantly, it has a visible impact on the directions of changes.

Thanks to this, ecological awareness increases and, what is most important, this increase concerns not only elites but also a large part of the societies, which – owing to rank-and-file initiatives of consumers – can affect the economic practices or the respecting of ethical and ecological norms by large concerns, and can influence the change of laws and (probably most importantly) can develop the ecological lifestyle.

2. Comparison of traditional (anthropocentric) ethics with ecological ethics

The emergence of ecological lifestyles is inspired by administrative circles to an inconsiderable extent; it is rather a result of the pressure of environmentally aware communities on officials. This awareness, in turn, has sources in various trends in thinking about the world: from the horrifying research results and scientific forecasts mentioned above, through philosophical considerations, to opinions rooted in religious beliefs.

Just like the whole society, the Church failed to notice ecological problems for long. Yet in confrontation with “the frightening prospects that environmental destruction represents,” it is more and more inclined to notice that “[s]erious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the factors that determine consumer choices, savings and investments” and that only “strong motivation for an authentic solidarity of worldwide dimensions” can lead to this.⁵ Through numerous statements and appeals of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Church tried to restore the dimension of Franciscan communion with the created world to the Catholic teachings. This direction was strengthened even

⁵ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, § 470, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html (05.09.2016).

more by Pope Francis, who calls us to start ecological conversion⁶ and proposes following St. Francis and treat the whole creation as a sister.⁷ In this vision, the world created by God is a unique system of signs through which God speaks and reveals Himself to people. Thus, the world is sanctity and its destruction or unjustified abuse should be treated as reprehensible sacrilege (“If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person” (1 Cor 3,17). Numerous ecological messages can also be found in the Bible. For example, the parable of Noah’s Ark (Gen 9, 8–17) reminds us that all beings are sacred and we need to take care of them. God’s words in this parable are symptomatic: “This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you.” According to the teachings of the Church, it was mainly due to the “disenchantment” of the world by technology based on instrumental thinking that thoughtless destruction of the natural environment was possible as well as the policy of economic growth at all costs, leading to increased production of waste, greater demand for energy and promotion of the human-consumer model.⁸ The Church claims that contemporary people often do not feel responsible for the world, which is a common good, as they have no self-esteem and do not believe that their actions can influence any changes. This is thought to be the consequence of the de-sacralisation of the world and depriving human beings of immanent value resulting from the instrumental and market-like principles of interpersonal relations. The adoption of a mechanical model of the world connected with instrumental rationalism exempts one from the obligation to take independent decisions and may tempt people to assume conformist attitudes and follow ethical relativism. Such a human being will not take any pro-ecological activities unless this may bring them benefits or unless such actions are common in their community. The Church points out that this philosophical trend is based on two erroneous concepts of humanity (collective and individ-

⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 217.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 11.

⁸ Conf. Z. Bauman, *Globalizacja: i co z tego dla ludzi wynika*, przeł. E. Klekot, Warszawa 2006, p. 96.

ualistic) diagnosed by John Paul II. In order to overcome this model of thinking, which is suicidal for people and for our planet, Christian philosophers propose changing economic and ethical paradigms so that they would also cover responsibility of each person for the future of humanity and the created world. This is about the holistic depiction of human and non-human reality, which refers to a certain extent to the source of the word Catholicism – *katholon* (according to the whole). It is also supposed to show that it is not the struggle of everyone with everyone else but that co-existence and harmony of co-existence regulate processes occurring in the world. Solidarity and joint responsibility for the world, active participation in the world and caring for the common good, the awareness of being a part of nature, emphasising the qualitative development of societies and individuals in opposition to hedonism and consumerism are the main values behind this paradigm. This is connected with the deepening of humility and the development of imagination in the situations of interference with nature. Thinkers following this trend point out that only the global restructuring of the society's mentality and institutions preserving it through teaching, economy or systems of values may give hopes for success.⁹

3. Rejection of anthropocentrism

Attempts at creating such a new paradigm meet the resistance of not only post-Enlightenment advocates of progress but also a part of communities representing an ecological attitude. Some representatives of Deep Ecology, who propose “new ethics”, argue with the proposals of the Church. Even though some of the postulates of the representatives of this trend coincide with the postulates of Christian thinkers (for example, conclusion that there is a need to rebuild economical, technological and ideological structures; statement that all life on Earth has value in itself and should be independent of its usability to human; or admitting that apart from satisfying essential life needs people have no right

⁹ Conf. W. Janusz, *Ekorozwój bez nieudomówień*, „Aura” (1998) nr 12, pp. 4–6.

to destroy or restrict the diversity of life forms), many other postulates cause justified controversies. One of them is the postulate of reducing the human population.¹⁰ Despite the fact that some of the principles they postulate are undoubtedly right, it is hard to agree with the representatives of this faction of Deep Ecology in one point: in their rejection of anthropocentrism.

The postulate of rejection of the anthropocentric position is attractive for many philosophers who seriously consider our responsibilities towards the creation. One of the most radical contemporary philosophers, Peter Singer, accuses projects of Christian thinkers of “speciesism” – that is, unjustified distinguishing human from other sentient beings (other species).¹¹ His critique of speciesism is based on the assumption that equal interests have the same value, regardless of the species of the being (the principle of equal consideration of interests).

Rejection of anthropocentrism, strengthened by Singer’s critique, started a broad discussion in philosophy. It appears that the anthropocentric position, although criticised in modern philosophy, can be defended on philosophical grounds. Even if we assume that various life forms have their own internal value and so animal and plant species should be protected, we determine this value as humans because we are unable to do it differently. It would not be proper to reproach people with speciesism and anthropocentrism, as P. Singer does, if we cannot free ourselves from this human point of view and start looking at the world from the perspective of an ant, for example. At the same time, we must notice that man has actually become the master and ruler of the world, so the anthropocentric perspective is obviously justified. What is more, one needs to see that inevitable anthropocentrism does not exclude the sense of responsibility for the world and the environment, sensitivity to human and animal suffering or imagining the consequences of human activity for both future generations of people and the planet we live in.

¹⁰ B. Devall, G. Sessions, *Ekologia głęboka. Życie w przekonaniu, iż natura coś znaczy*, przekł. E. Marglewicz, Warszawa 1995, p. 99.

¹¹ P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 88–89.

This aspect has been emphasised by H. Skolimowski, one of the creators of eco-philosophy, when criticising controversial ideas of radical philosophers-ecologists. He ironically claimed that “each form of human reflection, even the one critical of anthropocentrism, is a form of anthropocentrism. But one needs to distinguish malicious anthropocentrism, which destroys others in the name of human superiority, from good or even splendid anthropocentrism, which – for example in Buddhism – propagates the rule of compassion, care for all creations of nature as if they were holy.”¹² Obviously, man remains an element of nature, frequently abusing the advantage over other beings. One can even say that the criticism of anthropocentrism understood as aiming at fulfilling one’s selfish needs, especially at the cost of others, is fully justified. Therefore, it is important to reconstruct an ethical model in such a way as to guarantee affirmation of all signs of life and give moral value to non-personal beings, both animals and plants, as well as ecosystems and the whole biosphere. It is us who state that people, non-human beings and ecosystems have internal value and that is why we give them a right to live and we take care of them.

We cannot free ourselves from the notion that only man is a moral entity capable of assessing right and wrong, making critical choices, taking decisions and bearing personal responsibility. Only a person can either accept responsibility for his or her actions or reject it. It is worth pointing out that by eliminating the anthropocentric perspective we deprive ourselves of the possibility of evaluating the value of our existence in the world and in consequence we question the meaning of human existence. Radical ideas of some representatives of deep philosophy or Peter Singer go beyond the proposals of seemingly radical post-modernist philosophers, for example, Richard Rorty. Bear in mind that as the advocate of “disenchanted” the world, he claimed that stimulating human sensitivity is the main direction in the development of human philosophy.

Yet not all factions of Deep Ecology are so radical. Even though Henryk Skolimowski, the founder of eco-philosophy referred to above, is not

¹² H. Skolimowski, *Powstanie i rozwój filozofii ekologicznej widziane z perspektywy osobistej*, [in:] *Wokół eko-filozofii*, red. A. Papuziński, Z. Hull, Bydgoszcz 2001, p. 60.

a Christian thinker, he belongs to the philosophical movement of proportions very similar to the Catholic understanding of environmental problems. He notices the difference between the instrumentalisation of the world ruled by the model of human-conqueror and the world understood as sanctity, governed by the model of human-protector. Together with Christian thinkers, he also underlines that “human being was not created to consume but to be self-fulfilled in his or her humanity.”¹³ Importantly, this philosopher notices that transformations are not possible in the world and ecological reforms cannot be implemented without the mental change of humans.

4. Creation of a new system customised to man and the world

As we can see, the debate or rather dispute between individual trends concerns the people’s choice of lifestyle. Will they choose affirmation of the value and richness of the entire life or rather creation of technological progress based on increased consumption and devising new “needs”? We have already noticed that technique and technology deserve criticism for treating both nature and humans like objects. Many philosophers emphasize that science and technique which gave rise to the contemporary world are also threats to our civilization¹⁴. Philosophers warn us about the unintended, sovereign development of technological civilization that is prone to instrumentalise everything. They claim that this progress can lead to the end of human civilization, not only in consequence of a global disaster but also – as postulated by Francis Fukuyama quoted above – as a result of the development of genetic and social engineering¹⁵. As Leszek Kołakowski argued in his lectures, “Canons of our civilization, with its Christian and Biblical roots, still require respect for every human being. But the civilization totally dominated by the spirit of rationalism and sci-

¹³ H. Skolimowski, *Wizje nowego milenium*, Cracow 1999, p. 75.

¹⁴ F. Fukuyama, *Koniec człowieka. Konsekwencje rewolucji biotechnologicznej*, przekł. B. Pietrzyk, Kraków 2004, p. 6.

¹⁵ F. Fukuyama, *Koniec człowieka...*, p. 24.

entism will not be able to keep the phenomenon of sanctity for long. It will, even without saying so, think that it can reduce a human individual to his or her functions, which means that every person will be completely replaceable. This would be the end of humanity as we know it.”¹⁶

The Christian affirmation of human dignity, sanctity of life, immensity of experiences showing a Christian attitude to the world introduces us to an axiological perspective which is distant from the perspective held by proponents of rationalism and from proposals of philosophers, who also deny the sanctity of human life. As mentioned earlier, we are moral entities and through our existence we discover what is good and what is evil. However, it must be noted that in the last centuries we have observed actual progress in the moral sphere. Moral sensitivity of mankind increases; slavery was abolished; women gained full rights; charity campaigns support those starving in the distant parts of the world; we notice and try to limit the suffering of animals and protect dying species of animals and plants... What was obvious to St. Francis of Assisi centuries ago is also slowly becoming obvious to an increasing number of people. We feel more and more deeply the ethical problems appearing in relation to the awareness of any evil but also to the omission of doing good to which we feel obliged. During the globalization era, we notice global problems more distinctly as they relate to us directly. This refers also to the problems connected with human interference with nature, with evil done to other people and nature through wasteful exploitation of resources, leading to climate change and related famine or extinction of rare species.

Moral sensitivity of humans is still arising, even if we find this awakening too slow. This sensitivity is followed by ethical postulates and the appearance of new hierarchies of values or better understanding of the messages embedded in previous hierarchies. Former ethical concepts gain deeper meaning.

People accepting the assumptions of Deep Ecology also play an important role in this awakening. They stimulate thinking by protesting against the lifestyles of contemporary societies, by opposing increased consump-

¹⁶ L. Kołakowski, *O szacunku dla natur*, [in:] L. Kołakowski, *Mini-wykłady o maxi-sprawach*, Kraków 2008, pp. 123–124.

tion and excessive exploitation of nature, also through spectacular campaigns publicised in the media. Representatives of all concepts referring to the sacred character of nature may be our allies in the awakening and seeking of the possibilities to limit the consequences of ecological crisis. Debates between representatives of various solutions may focus the attention of the public on considerable threats and provide arguments for both sides suggesting the need to verify the lifestyle of people and communities.

The constant progress observed so far causes that most people do not have time to think about the sense behind this development or their role in life. Thus, philosophers should try to extract this wisdom, the knowledge proper for a particular condition of the world, a social situation and articulation of human condition.¹⁷

The question about happiness used to be one of the elementary ethical criteria. Let us wonder then if people are happy in the current social and economic model. Does a resident of Africa, who was forced to escape to a refugee camp because of greedy and wasteful politics, feel happy? Does an employee of the corporation whose business led to the exile of this African feel happy? Is an unemployed person whose factory was moved to the Far East happy? Even if he or she can buy products once made by him or her, even if he or she may buy them at a cost lower than the cost of their production? But it is also worth asking whether an employee from a distant country is happy – an employee who manufactures such products for beggarly wage, in conditions far from sanitary standards, often risking life or health. Here we have touched upon an elementary error in the system of economic liberalism: money does not make anyone happy and does not give life any meaning. As Ernst Friedrich Schumacher argued as early as the 1980s, we need to establish a system tailored to human needs (Schumacher). And it must be stressed that this system should be wise so that every human being could feel in the world as in their own friendly home.

In order to create such a system, we need to change our lifestyles, transform the mentality of societies and reconstruct institutional foundations

¹⁷ H. Skolimowski, *Filozofia żyjąca. Ekofilozofia jako drzewo życia*, Warszawa 1993, p. 123.

on which these societies are based. What we need is a smart transformation of the present hierarchies of values in education, science, economics and politics. Wisdom does not depend on the quantity of information but on the ability to select and use it properly. Information becomes superior knowledge thanks to involvement and in-depth cognition. It is a historical category, which changes along with subjects of knowledge, but it is also knowledge that accumulates the achievements of the past. So it cannot be created “out of nothing” but must be based on previous experiences and conclusions resulting from the mistakes made. It is good to point out that all ethical and ecological problems currently raised by ecologists may be solved within traditional ethics having roots in the Christian philosophy. Especially if we take into account the message of St. Francis and St. Bonaventure, according to which the supreme postulate of this ethics (respect for human dignity) is not in contrast with environmental protection, and the fact that traditional ethics encompasses premises for respecting other forms of life. Christian ethics is based on two millennia of experience and the awareness of the mistakes or omissions committed in the past. One should take advantage of its experience when solving contemporary problems.

This is the ethics that does not oppose progress but strives at achieving simultaneous progress in the moral sphere. It tries to be useful in restoring the self-esteem of contemporary people and supports them in seeking happiness, yet emphasising that happiness can be found thanks to contact with others and the world, and thanks to co-creation of common good.

Summary

Ecological challenges to ethics

This article is an attempt to shed new light on the environmental challenges of ethics related to over-exploitation of the world by humanity. This article aims to formulate guidelines for the project of new ethics that will be able to respond to these challenges, to appreciate the intrinsic value of the world without diminishing the value of human being. The starting point of the analysis is the increase of ecological awareness, observable both among scientists and politicians as well as among citizens and the Church. In the next part of the article, contemporary ecological ethics are compared with traditional anthropocentric ethics. The paper presents the diagnosis of the reasons for the exploitation of nature resulting with ecological crisis and offers a method of overcoming the crisis. It argues in favour of anthropocentrism, but rejects its radical version. In the last part of the paper there is a proposal to create a new ethics, appropriate for us and the world, which would be an extension and refinement of Christian ethics in dialogue with contemporary secular trends.

Keywords: ecology, crisis, ethics, Christianity, anthropocentrism

Ekologiczne wyzwania dla etyki

Artykuł jest próbą rzucenia nowego światła na ekologiczne wyzwania etyki, związane z nadmierną eksploatacją świata przez człowieka. Celem artykułu jest sformułowanie wskazówek dla skonstruowania projektu nowej etyki, która będzie w stanie odpowiedzieć na te wyzwania, docenić wartość wewnętrzną świata bez pomniejszenia wartości człowieka. Punktem wyjścia analiz jest wzrost świadomości ekologicznej, dający się zaobserwować zarówno wśród naukowców i polityków jak i wśród obywateli. Równolegle wzrastała też świadomość ekologiczna w Kościele. W kolejnej części zestawiane są współczesne etyki ekologiczne z tradycyjną, antropocentryczną etyką. Przybliżone zostają zarówno diagnozy powodów przyzwolenia na eksploatację przyrody, której konsekwencją jest kryzys ekologiczny, jak i metody wyjścia z tego kryzysu. Artykuł broni antropocentryzmu, chociaż odrzuca jego radykalną wersję. W ostatniej części artykułu pojawia się propozycja stworzenia nowej etyki, na miarę człowieka i świata, która byłaby rozwinięciem i udoskonalaniem etyki chrześcijańskiej w dialogu ze współczesnymi świeckimi nurtami.

Słowa kluczowe: ekologia, kryzys, etyka, chrześcijaństwo, antropocentryzm

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