

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: NATURAL AND MINERAL RESOURCES

*By Frank Turner, October 2014*

### **Theology as reflective practice in the light of faith**

Member organisations of the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network (GIAN) working in the field of natural and mineral resources are rightly likely to focus on the socially and environmentally destructive practices of the extractives industry, on suspected failures in governance by states or the international community.

However, any specific critique or policy proposal carries some intentionality beyond itself, rests on certain foundations. Theology aims to complement these other modes of reflection and analysis by considering how the exploitation or conservation of natural and mineral resources relates to our deepest convictions about human life and the life of the planet, from the perspective of a Christian anthropology. Theology adds no new empirical knowledge about the world, nor can it directly produce otherwise unknowable ethical norms. However all factual knowledge is rooted in the human capacity and need to discover and construct coherent *meaning*. We learn not merely by accumulating new facts but by grasping their context, significance and their inter-relationship: therefore knowledge is necessarily ordered by some overarching intellectual framework, explicit or implicit.

It is helpful when this framework is explicit and articulate. If they are to sustain and inspire us, our world views, our central beliefs, our animating feelings, need to be conscious, and examined. It seems clear that persons differ widely in their *felt* need to explore meaning. However, for human beings gifted with intelligence and freedom, maturity implies accepting *responsibility* for this framework. To be sufficiently (never totally or finally) clear about the foundations of our practice gives endurance amidst difficulties, allows creativity in seeking common goals, and enables us to remain faithful to our own experience while being open to those who hold a different vision.

In his book *The Dynamics of Theology*, Roger Haight writes this:

‘Christian theology attempts to construe all things, the world, human existence, human history and society, as well as God, from within the vision that is mediated to the Christian community by its religious symbols’.

Thus, theology (etymologically, ‘God-discourse’) not only speaks of the mystery of God, but about the entire field of meaning constituted by God, the cosmos, human society and each person’s own self, and about relationship between these four poles. Religious meaning is human meaning, just as, for believers, the human is intrinsically religious. In failing to respect material reality or secular disciplines of thought, theology would be a mere short-cut that turned into a blind alley. Isolated from considerations of the good of human persons and communities, and of the earth itself, scientific and industrial discourse about ‘raw materials’ would become destructive.

In *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer summarise as follows: ‘Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage’. It

therefore supposes the willingness to scrutinise our own personal experience of life, as well as (for Christians) growing in appreciation of the Scriptures and the Church's traditions. Within the humanly crucial perspective of social justice, it requires that we prioritise the experience of those who are marginalised and in poverty.

John Paul II has well expressed the mutually enriching (and absolutely necessary) relationship between philosophy, theology and other disciplines:

Philosophy and theology are, as sciences, limited attempts which can represent the complex unity of truth only in diversity, that is, within an open system of complementary items of knowledge. The Church wants independent theological research, research which is not identified with the ecclesiastical Magisterium, but which knows it is committed with regard to the common service of the faith and the people of God. (Address in Cologne Cathedral, 15th November, 1980)

It is natural, therefore that this theological reflection, which has been written independently of the position paper for GIAN entitled *Governance of Natural and Mineral Resources*, is complementary to that paper and coherent with it.

### **Co-Creation**

Natural resources are *of the earth*, part of the created order. This order is, we believe, a divine gift, which thereby becomes a human responsibility. By 'order' here is meant not repressive 'law and order' but a continuous *ordering* of human practices and purposes, which is simultaneously a resistance to the 'disorder' that constantly threatens life.

In the language of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius (in the 'Principle and Foundation') 'the other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings in order to help them pursue the end for which they were created'. That is, our use of such created resources is not arbitrary: it must be managed in such a way that our human vocation (love of God and of neighbour) is served. 'The things on the face of the earth' do not lose their intrinsic meaning or value, but are simultaneously given a human meaning.

Further, we humans ourselves are embedded in Creation, and our development towards maturity manifests both God's continuing gift and our acceptance of a collaboration with that gift. Healing the sick man at the pool of Bethsaida, Jesus says, 'My Father is still working, and so too am I' (*John 5: 17*). He assures his disciples that this work is passed to them: 'Truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father' (*John 14: 12*). This work is both a construction of the world and (as at Bethsaida and, as so often in the gospels) a *healing* of the world, or - according to the Jewish tradition - a 'repairing of the world', setting right what repeatedly goes wrong.

What is often called the 'disenchantment of the world' is primarily a loss of any sense of the intrinsic meanings and dignity of the material world, by parsing it exclusively in terms of a *reductionist* range of human meanings. The material world may be regarded as nothing but instrumental: for example, it yields financial profit. We

humans are neither to absolutise the world, nor to absolutise our own purposes and desires over against the world.

Take the fundamental 'natural resource' - the earth itself. A mining corporation, especially where in the developing world, it may be relatively unrestrained by regulation, may strip minerals from the land, pollute the life-sustaining water, and walk away once its business is done. The earth itself is abandoned, barren, poisoned; and local dwellers are deprived of its sustenance. The corporation uses, but also *devastates*, the land. This physical degradation is intrinsically destructive, whilst also symbolising a moral and (for religious believers) a theological degradation.

## Sin

Such a practice will theologically be described as *sinful*. Sin is degradation and dehumanisation as seen through the eyes of faith. In English, the word 'sin' is sometimes linked with the verb 'to sunder', to separate: in the case of mining just imagined, it splits apart elements that need to be kept together; the profit of a corporation from the good of the people on whom it impacts, and of the earth it exploits: *therefore*, in Christian understanding, it 'offends God'. (In the parable of *Luke 15*, the younger 'prodigal' son says, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you': these two 'sins' may be distinguished, but not separated: no one relates to, or offends, God 'neat'.)

The mining illustration equally exemplifies 'structural sin': or, in John Paul II's preferable phrase, 'structures of sin'. In fact, 'a sin' as commonly imagined, that is as a single deliberate action or omission, is a secondary, derived idea. In *Romans 5*, Paul describes sin as first a **force which enters the world** and brings 'death', the ultimate dehumanisation. 'All have sinned', he says. That is, sin spreads everywhere. All our thinking, all our action takes place in a world where sin goes before us (hence the foundation myth of 'original sin') and bears on us, in such a way that no one is immune. In Christian thinking, Jesus, the one who 'was like us in all things but sin', still suffers from the sin of the world (*2 Corinthians 5: 21*).

This idea needs to influence the way we engage with those we challenge, so that we shall not confuse legitimate and necessary criticism with the attribution of sin. It is not that corporations are collectively sinful and GNMR member organisations are without sin. A sense of sin, and ourselves as sinners - even where this cannot be articulated because of the secular genre of what we write - can give humanity, depth and compassion to our ethical stances and to our politico-economic analysis.

In thinking of sin and natural resources, two other perspectives may be helpful, drawing on the thought of Paul Ricoeur, then Søren Kierkegaard.

According to Ricoeur, human beings experience and struggle with evil, in their hearts and in their institutional belonging. Valid human characteristics become tainted. For example, to *have*, to *possess*, is not bad: Through use and ownership, the 'I' is extended through the 'mine', and a minimum of property seems almost essential to due autonomy and therefore to personality. That is why the Church has always defended the *principle* of property. It gives power (*potentia*) - the capacity and freedom to act. But the *innocence of having* easily becomes a trap as, individually or

collectively, we begin to identify ourselves with our possessions, and so *to be possessed* by them.

As beings essentially in relationship we are bound together by so much: by language, and communication, by shared tasks. 'Our' possessions, though, can easily divide us from others. Therefore the affirmation of property in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is always conditional. The amassing of property (by individuals, and also by corporations) is subject to the prior right of *all people* to share in property: in the jargon, this is 'the universal destination of the goods of creation'. So CST questions property when it moves from endowing people with capacity (*potentia*) to conferring excessive *potestas* (power over others).

In practice, globalisation often seems to confer on corporations such excessive dominance. To illustrate Ricoeur's argument, consider the case of El Salvador. The entire river system is drastically polluted, by mining and by agribusinesses such as sugar-production. The soil has so deteriorated that it has little capacity to absorb rainfall, which therefore runs off wastefully, without nourishing the soil. Since large corporations tend to be owned outside developing countries, notably in Australia, Canada, Europe and the USA, but also in China, India, Indonesia and on, these companies too often show little concern for local host governments and populations. With the collusion of local elites they are often able effectively to resist legislation limiting their freedom to contaminate, or requiring substantial restitution for the harm they do. International institutions have played their part too: at a critical juncture of mining development, the International Monetary Fund pressed host governments both to concede tax relief, and to reduce environmental protection and labour rights.

In Central America gold concentrations are very low, so the environmental cost of exploitation is especially high. You must cut down forest (and El Salvador retains only 3% of its ancient forests); remove topsoil; create open pits, since tunnel mining for such low mineral concentrations is unprofitable; use chemicals such as cyanide to separate the gold from the earth, although even tiny quantities of cyanide threaten life and destroy aquatic life. 'Acid mine drainage' rarely becomes evident till the mine has closed and the company has quit the country.

Further, natural resources cannot be considered apart from the history of their commercial exploitation. Throughout the Cold War, great powers fought or underwrote proxy wars in what they thought of as the 'Third World'. Local populations suffered grievously, even as their natural and mineral resources were exploited exclusively for the strategic needs of the sponsors' own industry. The Angolan civil war, which lasted from 1975 to about 2002 would clearly have been less prolonged without Angola's rich deposits of oil and diamonds, as one side was 'protected' by the Soviet Union and Cuba, the other by the USA, Israel and apartheid South Africa.

Thus mining industries (and especially those in colonised or developing countries) have always been marked by gross human exploitation, dividing people with fierce clarity into those who work at great risk with little reward from those who gain immense profits from above, or from afar.

No one **begins** this collective ‘structure of sin’, no one can singlehandedly opt out of it since we all live within the system: but all of us contribute to it and are born into it - and it is reinforced by vicious individual acts.

Søren Kierkegaard illuminates the fundamental modes of human responsibility that underlie personal and corporate practices. In his *Sickness unto Death* (1849), he outlines three types of sin (which he sees as ‘sickness’):

- *to focus on always doing what I want, without regard to God or to anyone else: from an individualist point of view we can regard this as 'freedom', but in truth it is 'sickness unto death'.* Think of defences of the ‘free market’: the expression is accurate since it is not the *people* who are free but the *market*. Of course even the market is not truly free, since it is commandeered by those multinationals that wield ubiquitous political patronage, so is loaded against smaller companies. ‘Freedom’ as ‘sickness unto death’ is a helpful category in face of the problematic neoliberal conception of freedom: that is, freedom from constraint in our choices, however detrimental these may be to others, to poorer countries and peoples.
- *to focus on always doing what **someone else** wants: to define ourselves by others' expectations, by peer pressure or external authority, therefore to live in others' identity.* In the present context we may think of those politicians and officials, in virtually every country who abdicate their responsibilities to the common good by acting in the service of corporations at the expense of their own people: or of corporate managers who act on behalf of their distant boards and shareholders.
- *to fail to exercise our 'will' **at all**: to deny all responsibility for the state of the world, to opt out in asking rhetorically: 'What on earth can I do?', 'What difference can I make?'* This form of sin - the abdication of moral responsibility - might be committed by governments who refuse to regulate their flagship companies as they would control smaller ones: or to regulate their companies operating overseas as they would regulate the domestic economy. It might refer to parent companies who take care to keep the specific practices of their subsidiaries at arm's length, while repatriating profits and controlling local boards. It might apply to us consumers when we prefer to ignore the impact of our buying choices on others.

## Grace

To write a too-brief section here could wrongly imply that ‘grace’ is merely (though fortunately) the reverse side of sin. Indeed, as there are ‘structures of sin’ so there are ‘structures of grace’. If evil is a ‘force’ so grace is by definition ‘power for good’. In Christian faith, however, grace has an ultimacy that sin does not. As St Paul insists, ‘where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’ (*Romans*, 5:20). Paul believes that this grace comes from the Father. It is given pre-eminently through Christ (*Ibid* 5:15), yet is universally active in the world. Just as ‘all have sinned’, whether or not their religious consciousness would allow them to use the word ‘sin’ in its full Christian significance, so all may receive and mediate grace whatever their conscious intellectual framework.

Grace is often contrasted with - and must at least be *distinguished* from - what we call 'nature'. God is the creator of 'nature', and this Creation may be thought of as a unilateral relationship. Human persons, though, are not only 'created', but are *brought into communion with God*: and the term 'communion' implies reciprocity. Grace is not merely an extrinsic 'token' of God's love. It is the gift of God's **self-communication**, so that human beings may share the very life of God.

Therefore no area of human life lies outside the scope of grace. In this world where goodness is always in part an active resistance to evil, political and economic life *either* tends towards ('asymptotically' - without ever reaching) what the theologian Rowan Williams calls 'the perfect justice of mutual dependence in communion': *or* it manifests the realities of sin, as discussed above. More precisely, avoiding a crude binary scheme, all those active in political and economic life are invariably caught up in processes where both good and evil co-exist and conflict.

This conflict between 'sin' and 'grace' worked out in secular terms, crosses all human boundaries. Thus corporations may despoil the land, may pay their workers unfairly for carrying out dirty and dangerous tasks, may siphon off excess profit while evading tax and customs obligations. Within these same corporations counter-forces will be active to promote socially and environmentally responsible practices. Many company personnel deal with employees as fairly and respectfully as possible, will seek to humanise the corporate presence.

Local peoples defending their communities, and civil society organisations working with them, may show remarkable dedication and courage. In fact, since evils often prompt deep qualities in response, the current crisis of corporate exploitation of natural minerals has led to the global emergence of profound indigenous resistance: from Amazonia to India, local peoples rediscover their own dignity in opposing long-standing oppression and exploitation. What has been called the 'indigenous awakening' could signal the beginnings of a crucial human rebalancing, as corporate dominance is resisted and 'the lowly are lifted up'. However, '*all* have sinned': local leaders may seek their individual gain at the expense of others, and be bought off by corporate wealth. Civil society organisations face their own temptations to dishonesty or self-aggrandisement, may neglect local consultation, may descend on communities and disempower them: hence the unflattering phrase 'the non-profit industrial sector'. The concept 'civil society' - referring to all organisations other than commercial or governmental bodies - embraces the Mafia as well as *Caritas Internationalis* - and no one active in *Caritas* will deem their own organisation to be without fault.

Governmental and other regulatory bodies are indispensable: where they are ineffective, the resource sector is vulnerable to endless corruption and malpractice. But we know that politicians and officials too can sometimes put first their own interests and their own power.

As individual persons we may well aspire to an equitable international economic order, whilst remaining attached to the unearned economic privileges accruing to our current social location, so resisting any change not in our own immediate interests.

To take both sin and grace seriously, therefore advocates for justice must resist the Manichean tendency to attribute all evil to their opponents - and especially their corporate opponents. To remain open to our own further conversion, and to remain free from intellectual and spiritual arrogance, without illusions about our own social impact is itself a graced struggle.

### **Tragedy, Hope, Liberation**

The faith that 'grace abounded the more' is not naive. St Paul makes his argument in the light of the Resurrection of Christ, without ever minimising the horror of the crucifixion that is 'a scandal' to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles' (*1 Corinthians* 22-25). Jesus himself must continually dispel the illusions of his disciples who believe that his project will be achieved in triumph and without suffering. In the Gospel of Luke his ministry begins when he assures all in the synagogue that the prophecy of Isaiah (liberty to prisoners, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed) 'is being fulfilled today even while you are listening' (4: 21). But it ends in his forgiveness of those who, in executing him, 'do not know what they are doing' (23: 34).

Struggle in the power of grace, to 'repair the world' (in this case the industrial-commercial world of resource-extraction), offers no escape from tragedy. Several years ago, appealing against the odds for peace in the Middle East, the Israeli writer, Amos Oz described two kinds of tragedy.

There is the Shakespearean tragedy where one side wins on a battlefield covered with blood and there is glory and defeat. [There is also] the Chekhovian tragedy where nothing is resolved, everybody feels a bit sadder and is unsure whether the battle was worth fighting, but where everyone is still alive. We have had enough Shakespearean tragedy in the Middle East, now let's have some Chekhovian tragedy!' (*The Guardian*, 4 September 1998)

Untold thousands of lives have been sacrificed throughout history to mining: in every country through unsafe conditions and avoidable accidents; in many countries through endemic violence in environments where corporate or military power operates under too little constraint or regulation, and where corporations may even employ illegal armed groups to protect their investment; through the poisoning of water sources, or the gross pollution, that destroys both human health and vital fish and animal stocks. The list could be prolonged, almost endlessly and amounts to tragedy on a Shakespearean scale.

Those who advocate for change, for social and economic justice, well know the 'Chekhovian tragedy' in which one may seem to win a small battle (may help achieve some useful regulation, or may halt some destructive operation) only to discover that commercial and industrial power is relentless, as the relevant political institutions are successfully lobbied, or as the corporate sector speedily adjusts by redefining projects or legal ownership without substantive change.

Yet this 'realism' in no way implies that efforts towards justice are futile. In those socio-political contexts where countervailing power is present, destructive practices may either cease, or be so strongly penalised that they *then* cease. Coal mining is dangerous everywhere. But it is less dangerous in the USA in 2014 than in 1914: and

less dangerous in the USA today than in China or Russia. Environmental disasters afflict many regions of the world, yet the impact on the affected communities, and the responses of the corporations responsible, differs dramatically according to region.

For example: in September 2014 the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that BP has set aside \$43 billion dollars to meet legal penalties and other costs after the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster of 2010 - a single, massive oil spill. Such sums will genuinely compensate suffering communities and will permit activities to regenerate the affected seas and the coasts. In contrast, in the Niger delta, one of the most polluted regions in the world, since oil was discovered in 1956, millions of barrels of oil have been spilt but never cleaned up. According to Nigerian government figures, more than 7,000 spills have occurred between 1970 and 2000. There are 2,000 official major spillage sites, many going back decades, and thousands of smaller spills still wait to be cleared up. The companies responsible, with their headquarters in the West, have never faced effective legal judgements or realistic financial penalty.

Those who know, and act in the knowledge, that a Nigerian life is of no less value than an American life, and therefore work against the odds to rectify such abuses, make a *decision for hope*. Any campaign will seem implausible in a world where 80% of the world's resources are commandeered by the richest 20% of the world's population; where this quasi monopoly of power is transferred into dominance in the membership of international regulatory bodies; and where so much consumption by this 20% quickly becomes waste. This formidably inequitable power structure is one reality. But another reality is the disposition, the theological **virtue** (and grace) of hope: when exercised, it seeks and finds reasons, but does not always presuppose them.

To return to our reflection on theology itself, this hope, which may well be the fruit of religious faith, is one way of constructing, and also discovering, *meaning: the meaning of community and the meaning of our own faith*. It 'constructs' because interpretation is the work of our minds; it 'discovers' because interpretation is not arbitrary but responds to the divine ordering of Creation, on the part of God who 'saw that it was good'. Interpretation is always open. Jesus says, for example, 'The poor you will always have with you' (*Matthew* 26: 11; *Mark* 14: 7; *John* 12: 8). Some have comfortably taken this pronouncement to mean that we may accept as 'natural' and inevitable the situation of their poverty (and the privilege of those of us who are not poor). But the practice of Jesus reveals *his own* interpretation: that we will *always* need to commit ourselves to solidarity with the poor.

In *A Rumour of Angels*, the sociologist Peter Berger notes the religious dimension of such an activity of constructing-discovering the created world-order:

A child wakes up in the middle of the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats... [His mother] will take the child and cradle him. She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same: Don't be afraid, everything is in order, everything is all right... All this belongs to the most routine experiences of life and does not depend upon any religious preconceptions. Yet this common scene raises a far-from-ordinary question which immediately introduces a religious dimension: *Is the mother lying to her child?* The answer can be No only if there is some truth to the religious interpretation of human existence... The reassurance, transcending the

immediately present two individuals and their situation, implies a statement about reality as such. (Cited in Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God*, p. 36).

The way we see the world *matters*. Certain facts cannot be denied: that of immense wealth, controlled by some at the cost of others; that of the intractability of the political and economic systems that sustain the patterns of oppression and hegemony. But those who see and understand that the resources of the world are for the people of the world will act differently in relationship to these facts, will be faithful in working for the 'order' that rejects fundamental disorder.

We continue to live in the world eloquently described by St. Paul in *Romans* 8: 22-25

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

We hope for what we 'do not see' - except in our faithful and creative imagination: a world where the world's resources are shared so as to sustain lives rather than crushing them. This hope embodies a claim about reality, and denies that the 'structures of sin' are decisive and normative. This is the spirit of the prayer attributed to the martyr Oscar Romero, whose vision led the powers structures of his world, supported by the powers of our wealthy world, to murder him:

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
... [Our work] may be incomplete,  
but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.