

EVERY PART OF CREATION MATTERS

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PERSONAL CONCERN.

When I was a boy I once asked my father whether there were also birds and butterflies in heaven. He pondered about this question for a while and then answered 'I don't think so because they do not have any soul'... Utterly disappointed I responded: '*Then I do not want to go there*'...

Later I decided to become an ecologist and land-use planner.

But **right now** I am even losing my dear butterflies and birds right here on earth! Many species of insects, bees, butterflies, birds, plants are threatened with extinction by our way of life, by our sheer limitless exploitation of nature.

Take the Netherlands: a quarter of the butterflies are threatened by extinction.

The rate of extinction is now 1000 times faster than before the industrial revolution. Around one million species are now at risk within decades.

Yesterday one of our speakers, Bishop Peter Fisher-Moller quoted Darwin on the 'survival of the fittest'. I would like to draw your attention to the fact however that this theory of Darwin has often been misinterpreted to say the least and sometimes even been misused. Even to the extent of defending capitalism: the survival of the strongest, rather than the 'fittest'. Darwin argued that only those species that 'have a close fit' to their niche, their ecosystem will survive.

Well then: we humans have made a real mess of it. We certainly do not have a close fit to the vulnerable ecosystem we are part of, we do not really care for creation, instead we are plundering and threatening it, putting even our survival as a species at risk.

Actually theology and ecology have much in common: both are about relationships and interdependency. Relationships between plants and animals, between humans and other creatures, between humans and God.

ROOT CAUSES.

For now however I need to focus on *two root causes* of the interwoven climate- and biodiversity crises which are deeply entrenched in our *language/culture* and in our *beliefs/paradigms*.

Language/culture.

Not only my father, but already the philosopher Descartes considered humans unique – as they had souls – while, quote 'the *rest of creation* is unthinking material'. On the grounds of recent research into e.g. communication and language of whales or the capacity to sense grief by primates I wholeheartedly disagree!

Moreover: in all our European languages we speak of 'environment' which is *part of the problem, rather than the solution*. As if we humans are at the centre of it all, whereas actually we are only part of a vulnerable ecosystem.

A system we are continuing to harm, whereby we will ultimately harm ourselves. Even ECEN might want to review its name: from European Christian *Environmental* Network (ECEN) to *European Care of Creation Ecumenical Network (ECCEN)*?

Similarly we use language such as ‘natural resources’, ‘raw materials’ and ‘ecosystem services’ as if the *whole of creation* is only there to serve humankind! It is still saying that humans are the ‘the crown of creation’ and were given dominion over creation.

In my view we were called to be good stewards and the image of the ark reminds us that we are to save all creatures.

Beliefs/paradigms.

At the core of these crises is that we are clinging on to the *belief in unlimited growth and GDP*. As an ecologist I know unlimited growth is an impossibility. Even the oldest creatures in our world, the large Sequoia trees cannot ‘grow into heaven’ as ultimately they would no longer be able to pump water up to the top of the tree.

We should emulate those ecosystems that are highly mature: tropical rain forests and coral reefs. When maturing they produce less and less waste and use energy more and more efficiently – nothing goes waste, they are extremely energy-efficient. Our current human systems unfortunately do exactly the opposite: they produce more and more waste and use energy less and less efficiently.

We must therefore move away from ‘growthism’ as Jason Hickel argues in the wonderful book ‘*Less is More*’¹. We need to rediscover that creation is a sacred gift to be treasured. We need to develop an economy of simplicity and sufficiency, a circular one for the welfare of our fellow creatures and our fellow human beings. After all, we in the northern hemisphere can afford to ‘live simply’, but our neighbours in the southern hemisphere can often only hope to ‘simply live/survive’!

EVERY PART OF CREATION MATTERS.

I was privileged to moderate the Thematic Reference Group of the Conference of European Churches on Economic and Ecological Justice and a Sustainable Future, which recently published the report ‘*Every Part of Creation Matters*’. Its title is telling enough.

Our document recognizes that the EGD is a complex and ambitious program, aiming to transform European economies into more sustainable and circular ones. However, our working group also has some reservations:

These are:

- *The EGD does not question the growth-paradigm or the GDP.*
It suggests that it would be possible to de-couple growth from carbon emissions. I would argue that we need to move beyond that and consider seriously whether another economic model is possible: an economy of sufficiency, a circular one, opting for de-growth or at least for selective growth.
- *The EGD states that ‘no-one should be left behind’.*
We could not agree more. An alternative sustainable economy should also be a fair one. This should however not be limited to policies at the international level to make sure certain member-states or regions are left behind. It should also be applied at national levels to make

¹ Less is More, Jason Hickel, Penguin, Dublin, 2022

sure that e.g. the energy transition will not become yet another burden for the ‘precarious’ by causing energy-poverty.

- *The EGD states that this policy framework is at one and the same time also the EU ‘s SDG Agenda.*

Right now we feel this is merely a statement. This should be worked out in much greater detail indicating in what way certain parts of the EGD are contributing to the various SDG-goals.

- *An analysis of the effects of the EGD on the nations in the southern hemisphere is lacking.* An example in case is agriculture, agricultural export and its effects on food sovereignty of nations in the southern hemisphere. Another is to seriously regulate the import and extraction of rare and exhaustive minerals needed for ‘our’ energy transition.

DO GOVERNMENTS TAKE THE CRISES SERIOUSLY?

Although governments have signed up to the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal their policies often are hardly brought in line with these commitments. Take my own country the Netherlands for example:

- For years the Netherlands asked for an exemption – the so-called ‘derogation’ of the EU nitrate manuring rules. The result being that even most of our vulnerable nature reserves suffer biodiversity losses due to very high concentrations of nitrate and phosphate.
- Recent research showed that 80% of our surface waters contains high concentrations of pesticides, yet again causing biodiversity losses.
- But nevertheless the Dutch Government resisted adopting the Nature Restoration Law, which is part of the EGD.
- We seem to treasure our top position as an exporter of agricultural produce too much! Even if e.g. on a population of 17 million people we are slaughtering a staggering 600 million farm animals annually.... (mainly poultry: chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, ostriches, but also pigs, cows, sheep, goats).
- Surely in view of the Green Deal a radical transformation of intensive agriculture is called for. Even the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in a recent report urged the Netherlands to make agriculture more sustainable in the near future.
- However when the government announces policies towards this end, farmers demonstrate and even form a political movement to resist this.
- If we take a closer look at the need to develop a fossil-free society, we discover that the Netherlands is still supporting the fossil industry to the tune of more than 30 billion of euros, either in the form of tax deductions or direct subsidies.
- It is even argued that opting for a fossil-free economy will ‘cost’ us large parts of our chemical industries sine its demand for energy outstrips even the most positive scenarios’ s of alternative energy (wind-, solar-, water- and hydrogen). Here again we do not seem to really want to move towards an economy of sufficiency, one which is circular, one which is no longer blindly aiming for growth.
- The EU concluded recently that the Netherlands without intensifying its policies will not achieve the climate change and alternative energy targets it set itself. Interesting detail: in order to achieve its targets in 2020, the Netherlands bought for millions of euros Danish wind energy. Which makes me wonder whether Denmark can meet its targets if it exports alternative energy....

And if our governments do NOT take it seriously, we may need to take action: political pressure and lobby, protest, demonstrate (like Extinction | Rebellion or Christian Climate Action), litigate (taking the Government to court – like Urgenda).

WE NEED TRANSFORMATION.

The dominant economic model is built on the principles of possession, commodification and ever-increasing productivity.. it will strip creation of its spirit and render it instead into a *mere stock of 'natural resource' for humans to exploit.*

In a system where nature is 'external' the costs of plundering it can also be externalised. Today we are exceeding the planetary boundary twice over.

All of this overshoot is being driven by excess consumption in high income nations. Half of the total materials they consume are extracted from low income countries in the southern hemisphere. With 'business as usual' we are on course to be using more than 200 billion tons of material stuff per year by the middle of this century. That is four times over the boundary.

What is more: according to the UN this magnitude of material extraction alone is responsible for 80% of total global biodiversity loss. The problem with this 'growthism' is not just that we run out of raw materials, but that we progressively degrade the integrity of ecosystems systems we depend on.

We are gambling with the web of life.

In 2019 more than 11.000 scientists from over 150 countries published an article calling on the world's governments to shift from pursuing GDP growth toward sustaining ecosystems and improving well-being. We need to shift from an economy that is organised around domination and extraction to one that is rooted in reciprocity with the living world.

We should not shy away from tackling 'growthism' and move to degrowth instead, towards a planned reduction of energy and resource use to bring our economies into balance with the living world in a safe and equitable way.

A 'steady state economy' which one: never extracts more than ecosystems can regenerate and two: never wastes or pollutes more than ecosystems can safely absorb. An economy of sufficiency, simplicity and solidarity.

But when I discuss this with some of my evangelical friends from the USA they are asking me: Kees, do you mean we need to change our American (*and by extension European*) Way of Life? And I answer: *hell I do!*

Combatting these interlinked crises should therefore not be reduced to merely accounting: CO-2 emissions, number of species threatened by extinction, tonnes of plastic etc. Nor to just mitigation or compensation.

It is about transformation. We need a radical change of lifestyle. Or to put it in the language of the churches: **it is about conversion!** Did not we pray last night: 'forgive us' during our worship?

'Forgive us, Lord, for our greedy selfishness, for our closed hands, grasping all we can to squeeze our natural resources dry'?