



5-5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Haney, Dierdre (2017) "A Proposal for Authenticity: Planting Human Roots in a Culture of God," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol1/iss1/5>

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Distance, Sergio Gomez, 2010¹

A Proposal for Authenticity: Planting Human Roots in a Culture of God

Deirdre Leigh Haney

¹ Image courtesy of the artist. <http://www.virtualartist.com>

Introduction

In the Echo Caves, South Africa, the deepest tree root ever recorded reached a depth of 400 feet. These record-breaking roots belonged to a wild fig tree.² Not only does the fig tree have depth within the earth, but the presence of the fig tree is also rooted throughout Scripture and the Christian religion.

One of the most recognizable stories of the fig tree in Scripture is depicted in Mark 11:12-25 where Mark presents us with the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree. The structure of the account is interesting, since it is interrupted by Jesus' clearing of the Temple. Having entered Jerusalem, Jesus is enraged by what has become of the Temple's courts. He drives out those who are there to sell and consume, and accuses them of making a sacred place into a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17). Upon the return to the fig tree, the disciples realize the tree has "withered" from the roots due to Jesus' curse (Mark 11:21).³

David Guzik, in his biblical commentary of Mark 11, explores the symbolism behind the cursing of the fig tree and clearing of the Temple. Guzik proposes that this story functions as, "the only destructive miracle" in the New Testament and is a result of the fig's deceptive advertising.² Aware of the multiple interpretations possible with powerful symbols, I would like to add another, perhaps Jesus cursed this fig tree down to its roots in order to teach a lesson about humanity's roots. This paper will contemplate the roots of humanity as designed by God and decipher how our roots, as children of God, can become prevalent in contemplation, discernment, and actions today. Through the works of the Jesuits Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Pope Francis, this paper will first highlight humanity's unique design and argue for the importance of contemplation in contemporary culture. Next, the lessons of Christ as deciphered in the cursing of the fig tree along with Walter Brueggeman's discussion of a "royal consciousness" will help highlight the appropriate actions and discernment in order to strengthen, manifest, and behold the beauty of our human authenticity.

Design

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a Jesuit priest and philosopher, writes about humanity and the cosmos in the *Phenomenon of Man*. In the book, Teilhard introduces his readers to the awakening of human nature as an awakening of the senses. These senses include spatial immensity, depth, number, proportion, quality, movement, and the organic.⁴

It is important to unveil the thoughts of Teilhard when discussing humanity's roots, since one cannot talk about a contemporary crisis in human authenticity without the basis of an understanding about what human authenticity means. For Teilhard, the awakening of the person

² United Nations Environment Program. Interesting Tree Facts. Dec 10, 2016.

³ David Guzik, "David Guzik Commentary on the Bible." Study Light, 2001-16. Web, 3A.

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin focuses on the ability for the reader to see, a coherent perspective of what the world is in the present moment and where the human person fits into it. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 33.

and thus the senses are a self-realization of not just who humanity is, but of humanity’s identity in the physical world. The spatial immensity man or woman awakes to is that of understating the vastness of the world. Depth constitutes the understanding of the distance in time and events that can be apprehended as a layer in humanity’s becoming. The sense of number allows one to gain insight into the interconnectivity and fragility of effective change, and proportion allows one to differentiate and have the ability to deal with the multiplicity around them. Quality is inherently interesting for it gives one insight into perfection and novelty. Finally, the organic helps one relish in the physical links and unity of the world humanity exists in. For Teilhard, his mission is presenting the human person as “a whole which unfolds.”⁵

The idea of humanity with the universe as whole, but also vastly different, is important when discussing humanity’s roots in God. When man or woman can understand humanity’s roots as intertwined with the roots of the physical world, as well as the fragility of this relationship, humanity’s purpose becomes clearer.⁶

Contemplation

As the Hebrew Scriptures attest, human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, have a purpose, and so do the rest of the creatures who reside alongside humans (Gen 1:27). Included among these creatures, are also soil, mountains, water, and air. They were all made by God, and thus have purpose, beauty, and intention. Pope Francis writes about the difficulty of our connecting with these “creatures” who from an objective standpoint cannot necessarily communicate with us. Yet, much of our personal relationship with these “creatures” is what may bring us to our personal relationship with God (*LS* 138).⁷

The flowering of my relationship with God is reflected on a quaint dock made of wobbly wood panels. This dock, isolated on a small creek somewhere within the windy waterways of New York, is where my personal relationship with God first manifested. It was on this dock that I began my relationship with God, and first felt God’s guiding hand present in my life. It was at this place that I began my ongoing journey of contemplation. Nothing in this is unique, except a personal place and relationship with God that is inherently mine. Many people have this place of joy, solitude, or care in which one is brought into a relationship with the questions that make one uniquely human. Here may be where one can begin to see the value in all of creation. Here, is where one can see why environment and ecosystems are so uniquely intertwined with culture and society. Here is where one can begin to grasp human design, and what that means for authenticity and roots.

As he speaks of human design, Teilhard is also a believer in the importance of reflection, “Reflection is, as the word indicates, the power acquired by a consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself as of an object endowed with its own particular consistence and value: no longer merely to know, but to know oneself; no longer merely to know, but to know

⁵ For Teilhard, a “whole which unfolds” is the concept that one cannot truly see the human without incorporating both the interior and exterior of human existence. Teilhard de Chardin, 33-35.

⁶ Teilhard discusses the human ability to love as a “physical convergence of the universe.” Teilhard de Chardin, 265.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si, On the Care for our Common Home* (Boston: Pauline Media, 2015).

that one knows.”⁸ Through the eyes of Pope Francis, who speaks about a reflective stance when the human person is immersed in nature, it is apparent that nature may provide insights through the interconnectedness with the human person as well (*LS* 11). When this understanding is met, our interconnectedness with nature is unavoidable.

Pope Francis reflects on the previous work of Pope John Paul II, “This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since ‘for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice’” (*LS* 85). Here, the codependence of our innately human roots combines with the roots of nature. I think this is the essence of the importance of being aware of human roots. According to Teilhard, contemplation enables one to uncover their identity. Modern day culture and insight has grown more aware of the positive results of reflection. These insights include numerous theologians such as Pope John Paul II, and Pope Francis. Pope Francis’ call to reflection is highlighted in his discussion of *rapidification*. *Rapidification*, for Pope Francis signifies the “more intensified pace of life and work” that leads to a “continued acceleration of change affecting humanity and the planet” (*LS* 18).

Pope Francis warns that many of these decisions are resulting from a quickly changing world, and often contemporary culture’s decisions are essentially unconscious. Pope Francis warns that if these unreflective decisions do not result in a positive effect for the human person or creation, they may lead to progress that has a destructive nature. It is these unconscious decisions that are leading society into a world where purpose and authenticity are becoming ever more hypothetical and inaccessible (*LS* 109).

Perhaps, we see the environment showing signs of vulnerability, because like the mountains and ice caps; the human person is also undergoing “social decay,” which makes us oblivious to our codependence with nature (*LS* 122). Pope Francis discusses social decay as a result of the lack of contemplation in culture, thus social cohesion becomes vulnerable the further the human person is from God.

Reflection through the insight of Teilhard is interesting, because he understands reflection to have external results, as part of internal realization. He refers to human design as an ability to know the human person, in this form of reflection, an aspect that makes one uniquely human. Yet, if one thinks about the interconnectedness and relationship shared with place and animals, as Pope Francis attests, perhaps the human person can see that it is the connection with the world around them that makes them uniquely human. Through this understanding it becomes apparent that care for this earth is essential. The human person does not only physically depend on it, but does so emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually as well.

Now that the co-dependence and relationship between the roots and authenticity of the human person and the environment are better understood, the human person can better understand their roots beyond design.

⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, 165.

Discernment

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann and Pope Francis are among many great thinkers that contemplate our culture as a culture that is losing sight of the presence of God. Brueggemann presents the argument that we must develop an alternative consciousness from the one held by the dominant culture. Brueggemann states that unless we can dismantle the current religion of immanence and accessibility in dominant culture, we will remain in a society in which, "God is so present to us that [God's] abrasiveness, [God's] absence, [God's] banishment are not noticed, and the problem is reduced to psychology."⁹ The absence of God, or absence to notice God not only affects our culture, but as Pope Francis would agree, our environment in turn (*LS* 35).

In *The Splendor of Creation* Ellen Bernstein speaks about the amazement that land mass exists above water. According to science, land mass, denser than water, should sink under the water. For many, this physical paradox becomes an attesting fact to the existence of God.¹⁰ I felt a sharp sense of urgency and pain in my heart looking at the state of the Maldives with this sentiment in mind.¹¹ I was awoken with the fear that the sinking of the Maldives, and other places across the Earth is a physically accessible testament for the absence of God.

Just as Pope Francis speaks about human decay in contemporary society, Jesus had also shown concern and warning through the story of the fig tree. Biblical scholar J.R. Daniel Kirk attests that the stories of the cursing of the fig tree and the clearing of the Temple should be interpreted as a pair.¹² While Kirk gives insight into why he believes this story was a prediction for the destruction of the Temple, I believe that it still remains an important lesson to highlight the contemporary crises that Pope Francis recognizes today. J.R. Daniel Kirk shows his readers that the symbolic nature of a fig tree, and the uncharacteristic nature of Christ's curse could be widely recognized as a forecast for the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem.¹³ In understanding the meaning behind the destruction of the temple, we can see the same implications for destruction, perhaps of our environment, in our contemporary culture today.

Just as Guzik breaks up his commentary of this lesson of the Bible, I also believe the lesson becomes more clear when pieced into three separate instances. First, the reader experiences Jesus cursing the fig tree after being disappointed with its lack of fruit. The fig tree is barren, and as a result Jesus states, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (Mark 11:14). Jesus is acting uncharacteristically, but because the disciples heard his words it can be assumed it was a teaching mechanism. In the second part of this chapter, Jesus makes it clear that humanity has grown to misunderstand God's wishes for humanity, he is so vastly disappointed that he responds intensely. Just as Guzik concurs, "If He wants to turn over some tables in our hearts, so

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 41.

¹⁰ Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 31.

¹¹ The Maldives are a series of islands, or atolls, in the Indian Ocean. These islands are prominent in the international discussion of climate change due to their vulnerability because of rising sea levels. The World Factbook, "South Asia Maldives," Central Intelligence Agency. Web.

¹² J.R. Daniel Kirk, "Time for Figs, Temple Destruction and Houses of Prayer in Mark 11:12-25." Fuller Theological Seminary, Web, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

be it.”¹⁴ In the third part of the story, the reader is brought back to the now wilted fig tree. Jesus' remarks helps us show how important it is to trust in God;

Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea,” and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:23-24)

Jesus attests that faith in God could move a mountain. Once the human person digests what this means for humanity's design, it is apparent why Jesus would be so vastly disappointed with the occurrences at the Temple. The teaching from the Scripture implies that if trust is completely rooted in God and God's design, the human person will be taken care of. Not only did God bless the human person and all other living things with authenticity, but also a place of worship to manifest beauty and form community - the Temple. Yet, Scripture shows that in the story of the fig tree the purpose of the Temple is tainted. Jesus, upset at how vastly wrong and misconstrued the actions of the humans involved were, acted intensely and in an unlikely way. He acted in a way that would call us to questions, and hopefully to enact change. In his eyes, trading and participating in commerce in the Temple was not the reality God had intended for us. In Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's book, *The Garden of God*, the reader is exposed to the concepts of *datum* and *donum*. Datum is to be understood, and donum is to be received. If we understand God's intention through this concept the child of God can realize that the Earth around us is a gift that we are to appreciate as a gift. The world around us is one for us to not take for granted but rather to love, cherish, and get to know.¹⁵

The concepts of donum and datum allows one to understand the perspective of Christ. Jesus could see so clearly how placing complete trust in God and away from the superficialities and riches of the world could keep the human person fed, satiated, and alive. Perhaps Jesus cursed the deep roots of a fig tree, to represent how humanity's roots could become inherently damaged and stray from authenticity, if the human person withholds trust in God.

Action

Walter Brueggemann, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, introduces his readers to the dangers of a consumerist society as one of the three factors that instill a “royal consciousness.” For Brueggemann “royal consciousness” is a culture of numbness and of misconceptions. Brueggemann attributes this to a lack of satiation, which contemporary culture covers up with consumerism. This concern of a contemporary crisis mirrors the warning Jesus gave in the cursing of the fig tree. Brueggemann describes this present state as an economics of affluence.¹⁶

Brueggemann speaks about the unfortunate reality of the consequences of an economics of affluence beyond consumerism. He argues that an economics of affluence fuels the destruction of human authenticity. "Covenanting, which takes brothers and sisters seriously had been

¹⁴ David Huzik, “David Guzik Commentary on the Bible,” StudyLight.org.

¹⁵ Alex Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 60.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, 33.

replaced by consuming which regards brothers and sisters as products to be used.”¹⁷

Brueggemann shows the dangers of this dominant paradigm in contemporary culture. It is a culture in which the human person is no longer valuing their brothers and sisters *as* brother and sister, but rather as a tool to help satiate their numbness. Brueggemann’s goal throughout the *Prophetic Imagination*, is to instill “the task of prophetic ministry,” which is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us”¹⁸

Here, one can see the parallel between Brueggemann’s concerns with contemporary culture and Jesus’ concern within the story of the fig tree. The Temple was to be honored as a sacred place, similar to how relationships between human persons are intended to be sacred in community. When society lives in a consumerist culture, whether in the Temple or outside the Temple, the worth of humanity as an end in itself is sacrificed. In a consumerist society, and in a consciousness of economics of affluence, we begin to count our worth as a property of currency. As previously referenced through Pope Francis, the root of humanity is to spread the beauty of God. There is no monetary tag that can project the beauty in the design of God.

Brueggemann describes the economics of affluence in modern day as a consciousness “in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed and we can eat our way around it.”¹⁹ This highlights the numbness that contemporary culture adopts when operating in a “royal consciousness.” Brueggemann insists that the only way to break out of this consciousness is to break into an alternative consciousness, which he describes as one of passion. He continues, “Passion as the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel is the enemy of imperial reality. Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice. Its politics intended to block out the cries of the denied ones. Its religion is to be an opiate so that no one discerns misery alive in the heart of God.”²⁰

In addition to the economics of affluence in the “royal consciousness,” Brueggemann also points out other contributing factors such as a politics of oppression and a religion of immanence and accessibility. Brueggemann believes the only way to combat these three forms of consciousness is through passion and will even consider this a part of what he terms “prophetic ministry.”²¹ Brueggemann explains that we can access the actions necessary to become prophets through a discernment and reflection of our theology. He insists that it is through rekindling our relationship with God, that the human person may overcome the royal consciousness and the numbness of present day society. He warns that without the ability for passion and an alternative consciousness, contemporary culture may continue to banish God.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, similarly discusses the numbness and misconstrued satiation that the human person may undergo living in contemporary culture. While he explains the social impact he also guides the discussion into the environmental implications.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, 33.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, 13.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, 41.

²⁰ Brueggemann, 41.

²¹ Brueggemann, 13.

Here, one can begin to grasp the societal implications of a culture that operates without God in addition to witnessing to the tangible results of this culture as it manifests in our environment. Pope Francis states, “a sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interest and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful” (*LS* 23). This statement holds a lot of strength in support of the formation of an alternative consciousness. It shows that the concerns for the earth are intertwined with the concerns of society, this connection is seen in the analysis from Brueggemann, Pope Francis and Teilhard de Chardin. The earth is broken by consumerism the same way Pope Francis would say the human heart has become dismantled. As Francis states, “the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than the economic benefit to be obtained” (*LS* 23).

Conclusion

In order to overcome the present cultural crises, Pope Francis, Walter Brueggemann, and other scholars propose that the human person must be willing to adopt a paradigm shift. It is relevant for our contemporary culture to undergo a change of mind, a change of heart, and a recognition of humanity’s authentic roots. I fear that much of our culture may have been temporarily lost, for instead of planting roots in the trust of God, we have placed our roots in the superficial luxuries of the world.

In conclusion, the insights of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Pope Francis, and Walter Brueggemann, all rooted in Scripture have helped develop three ways in which authentic human roots may be cultivated within contemporary culture. The first way, as Teilhard de Chardin writes, is reflection on the wholeness of the person and the awakening of the senses. This reflection will fuel the understanding and beauty behind human authenticity. Once authenticity is better understood, Pope Francis encourages “a deep sense of communion with the rest of nature,” as well as “tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings” (*LS* 91). This communion will allow for the discernment of modern culture and strengthen our roots in trust in God, just as Scripture shows. Finally, as Brueggemann would attest to, we are led to an action that embodies passion and an openness to an alternative consciousness. It is here that the human person will be strengthened to transform and heal the world, cognizant of their roots in God’s creation and able to critique and work to dismantle the misconstrued realities of contemporary society. SST: LMU

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