

Global Change and the Quest for Providence
A Reflection on Religious and Ethical Aspects of Global Change
Otto SCHAEFER, Potsdam (Germany)

1 Introduction

Theology is always linked to a specific faith, in my case to the Protestant branch of Christian faith. On the other hand, theological thinking participates in a form of rationality which makes such traditions communicable and opens them for debate. In this sense, even particular religious experiences and patterns of interpretation represent a treasure of humankind containing as they do existential explorations and existential insights. So they can help in formulating questions and shaping intuitions even in a different ideological context. Religious questions are expressions of general questions relating to human life; this is the reason for phenomena like inculturation of religions, interreligious dialogue and the reciprocal influence of theology and philosophy. So I hope that a theologian's contribution to a scientific gathering can be useful.

Faith and reason form a constitutive tension for all our reflections here. The term of faith, as I use it here, means every profound existential conviction, be it a part of any constituted religious system or not. Any system of values and any system of global interpretation can be described in terms of such a tension between faith and reason. "Faith" means personal implication and personal appropriation, finally personal commitment to affirmed convictions. "Reason" refers to generalizing interpretation, to mediation and legitimation of subjective experiences and convictions. Faith without reason is fanatical, reason without faith is sceptical. A sceptical attitude doesn't implicate one's own existence and one's own person and remains in distant and relativistic indecision. Contrarily, a fanatical attitude doesn't expose itself to the challenge of plurality and judges general human conditions by the standard of a particular faith. Both fanatics and sceptics withdraw from real dialogue.

2 The quest for sense: the experiences of resonance and absurdity

Every individual and every group aspires to harmony. In every team and in every family we take account of this. The psychological fact is rather trivial, but it points to a more profound and a more common existential orientation of humans. In all our encounters, in all our central experiences we strive after sense (or meaning). Meaningful (in this profound existential sense) are situations which confirm our expectations and accomplish our hopes: life unfolds its potential and 'miracles' occur, we feel enriched, charmed and loved and we can acquiesce also to the limits and the finitude of our existence and the sorrow of this life and this world. The quest for sense is a fundamental existential disposition linked to the 'responsive constitution' of human beings. Religious traditions express this quest for sense and make answers, satisfying and happy ones, answers conveying encouragement and comfort, but also complaint and protest.

The German theologian Gerd Theißen suggested the terms of resonance and absurdity to define such experiences. Absurdity as well as resonance, for the quest for sense remains an ambivalent risk leading to accomplishment or to failure. The musical metaphor of resonance implies that our soul reverberates when its quest for sense is successful. Contrarily, absurd experiences are not so much senseless ones, but those which deny the possibility of sense and deride the quest for sense itself – and there are many of such experiences of absurdity in our world.

Now, which are the types of experiences producing resonance or absurdity? Theißen suggests a useful classification which covers multiple experiences and encounters. I am not sure that his terminological choices are always very appropriate, but this is not our problem; I reproduce the original terms of Theißen without discussing them.

- “Nomological” experiences in Theißen’s classification are religious ones referring to the order or, if you prefer, the rational disposition of nature. In the first place, this means the everyday experience of a clearly structured world with regard to its temporal, spatial, material and intellectual dimensions. In a more abstract form and with regard to the history of science, this experience refers to the non-trivial structural affinity between mathematically constructing reason and objective reality. I would like to stress that it is not the fact itself which produces ‘resonance’, but its emotional quality in wondering about such correlations.

Newton, Kepler and Einstein are well known representatives of an intensive sensibility to this type of resonance. We should mention that a corresponding absurdity exists also: the frightening “eternal silence of infinite space” in Pascal, Camus referring absurdity to what he calls ‘the density and strangeness of the world’ (Theißen, *Argumente*, p. 55), and finally Jacques Monod comparing humans to nomads lost in an inhospitable world.

- At the other end of the scale, we find encounters with our fellow humans, encounters which Theißen divides into three types of experience of resonance and absurdity: hermeneutical ones, those of mutual assistance (solidarity) and erotic ones.

Hermeneutics means the art of understanding and interpreting. Consequently, hermeneutical experience describes the non trivial phenomenon consisting of mutual understanding among fellow humans, not only on an intellectual level, but also by a correspondence of ‘you’ and ‘I’, by a mutual and common communication of alterity and identity.

This leads to the experience of being accepted and supported by the others, in other words to solidarity.

Erotic resonance integrates many other experiences of resonance, those of understanding and assistance, the communication of living beings and the fascination of beauty. Erotic attraction associates these resonant experiences and enhances them.

The chance of resonance is not without the risk of absurdity. So the religious experiences produced by the encounter of our fellow humans include the risk of failure, of misunderstanding and denial and of destructive conflict.

- The resonance and absurdity experienced by communion with living beings is called the ‘organological’ experience. Theißen thinks of encounters by which we meet a part of ourselves in other living beings: we can experience joy and we can suffer with them. This is known by every owner of a dog, by every family with a cat or a parakeet. Albert Schweitzer criticizes and refutes a philosopher (W. Wundt) who doubted the possibility to really share the joy of an animal by a rather cross remark: “it is as if he never had seen a thirsty ox drinking...” (*Kultur und Ethik*, p. 226). It is Albert Schweitzer also who, on the basis of the organological experience of resonance, founded an ethical system derived of tendencies in the history of philosophy. This ethical system is based on the fundamental idea of (a quasi-religious) respect for life. “I am life aspiring to life – among (other) life aspiring equally to life” – this respect of the striving for life in all living beings is – for Schweitzer – the basis of all moral activity. I reproduce a passage in Theißen’s book(*Argumente*, p. 64):

“Our aspiration to life encounters resonance in all aspiration to life manifested out of ourselves: ‘ My own aspiration to life implicates the desire of continuous life and of the mysterious elevation of life which is called ‘delight’ and the fear of destruction and of the mysterious restriction of the aspiration to life which is called pain, and this is right also of all aspiration to life out of me – be it expressed or silent” (A. Schweitzer, *Aus meinem Leben und Denken*, p. 133). The correspondence of our aspiration to life and that of all creatures may be experienced in a way that we feel invited to continue the evolution to higher organization we observe in the whole process leading from hydrogen to the most complicated organisms. So we strive for an enhancement of life, for the development of a more differentiated expression in art, for improvement of knowledge in science, for the foundation of life protecting institutions. Then our own life appears as the echo of an overwhelming tendency of life to ‘more-than-life’. Such an activity can be rooted in the organological experience of resonance” (Theißen, *Argumente*, p., 64).

On the other hand, life exists at the cost of other life, it means to eat and to be eaten by others, it means to exploit and to be exploited. The experience of absurdity accompanies the experience of resonance.

- The “aesthetical experience of resonance and absurdity circumscribes phenomena in the human and in the non-human universe... It is difficult to conceptualize precisely what is happening in us when we are affected by aesthetical experience. We don’t understand what is going on in the world or even in our own artistic work. Do we know what we are moved by when listening to music? Nevertheless music provides us with something like a minor ‘revelation’, but its substance is withdrawn from us just at the moment when we suppose we have decoded it. For that very reason aesthetical experience can become a religious one” (Theißen, *Argumente*, p. 66).

The aesthetical experience of absurdity is not bound to the notion of ugliness.”Today’s art often has to be ugly in order to open up our reality”, Theißen says (*op.cit.*, p. 67). Aesthetical absurdity appears rather in those situations where things become banal, where reality falls to pieces, to insignificant pieces, though they be beautiful ones (in German: “Kitsch”).

- Behind all the types of resonance and absurdity we have described, Theißen discovers another one of ultimate and fundamental character, the experience of being per se. He calls it the “existential experience of resonance and absurdity”. Nearly three hundred years ago, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz formulated this experience (in French) in his “Rational principles of nature and grace” (§ 7) and his statement is now known as the “fundamental question of metaphysics”: “... pourquoi il y a plus tôt quelque chose que rien” – “why is there rather something than nothing”. – “Car le rien est plus simple et plus facile, que quelque chose” – “For nothing is more simple and easier than something” (Leibniz, *Vernunftprinzipien*, p.12). Actually there is, very fundamentally, but also very simply “an astonishment about the fact that something exists” (Theißen, *Argumente*, p. 68).

And there is also a corresponding absurdity, a sort of existential nausea, “a disgust of all things... which makes them absurd and meaningless” (Theißen, *loc. cit.*).

In our summer school we are working on biospheric interrelations and on vulnerable ecosystems. In relation to this matter, the quest for sense specified by the classification of Theißen opens up an additional dimension of understanding which we can call the religious one or the fundamentally existential one (this is a matter of conceptual and terminological choice). Especially the nomological, the organological and the aesthetical experience enter in

the approach to ecosystems, frequently also on the level of the personal motivation of scientists who did not choose this field of research accidentally. There is a joy in opening up complex order, there is a fascination in living beings either in their incredible abundance and variety or in their improbable existence under extreme conditions, finally also a fascination with the permanent innovation inherent in life's auto-organisation. There is also the aesthetical dimension – e.g. of landscape – which appears in a very impressive way in the biogeographical descriptions or depictions, of the ancestor of all contemporary ecology, I mean Alexander v. Humboldt. Humboldt's chief work is entitled "Cosmos" and cosmos means the universe as a beautiful order, as an aesthetically meaningful reality. Marked by humanism and by the Greek classics, Humboldt adopts this very significant term of cosmos and transmits it to his posterity.

Now we come to our second chapter dealing with the doctrine of providence. We started with the quest for sense in a very comprehensive approach. Now we focus on phenomena which we nowadays call ecosystems and biosphere. Applying the quest for sense to these phenomena we are led to the notion of providence; the quest for sense becomes a quest for providence.

3. A classical conceptualization of resonance, especially in nature: the doctrine of providence (*Providentia Dei*)

Religious experiences of resonance as defined by Gerd Theißen have been formalized in classical western tradition by the concept of providence. Providence is a theological concept, but also a philosophical one and its origin is philosophical indeed. Stoicism defined providence in the framework of the rationality of the world's global disposition. Stoic philosophers endeavoured to demonstrate in which way the universal Reason, the Logos, manifested itself in different parts of the universe. Simultaneously they tried to prove to what extent this world has been favourably disposed for the utility of rational beings, i.e. human beings. So the doctrine of providence grew up in a stoic nursery and some of its problematic unilateral tendencies come from this early stage of its development. An example is a certain fixation on utility; natural phenomena are often qualified according to their immediate utility for human beings.

The Greek philosophical doctrine of providence joins with Jewish and Christian theology at the beginning of our era. Now the place of universal Reason, of Logos, is attributed to the one God and wise Creator of the world. God creates the world and he continues to preserve it. He provides all that is necessary for life and his dispositions as a whole, being favourable to life, allow earthly creation to exist. The Creator acts in two ways:

- On the one hand, he rules the world by natural laws and provides fertility to all living beings (the biblical notion of blessing); so the creation's wise order conserves itself by the so called secondary causes. For this form of providence, later tradition has coined the term "*providentia ordinaria*". This 'ordinary providence' is of the most interest for our subject.
- On the other hand, according to this doctrine, the Creator also intervenes directly in the course of the world. This allows the possibility for miracles such as the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea or the healing miracles of Jesus to be understood. When interpreted in terms of 'supernatural' divine action, this second aspect of providence called "*providentia extraordinaria*" is problematic, of course. But at the same time, the assertion of extraordinary providence preserves the concept of providence from a deterministic tendency, i. e. from a rough-and-ready idea of causality.

3.1 The doctrine of providence in Greek and Roman Antiquity

I would like to show by only two examples, a Jewish one and a Christian one, how the doctrine of providence has been exposed by ancient theologians. The examples I chose refer specially to phenomena which we attach to climate and ecosystems. The two authors considered are the Greek-speaking Jew Philo of Alexandria (“an old man” in 40 A.D.) and the Latin-speaking Christian Minucius Felix (ca. 200 A.D.). Both discuss providence in the form of dialogues, which is not an accidental literary choice; for they want to bring respectively to the Jewish or to the Christian faith indifferent persons or critics with a philosophical background.

3.1.1 Philo of Alexandria, “On providence”

“Wisdom is manifested in nature by the production of fruit, by the wonderful disposition of stars, by the unchangeable course of sun and moon, by the regular position of seas and oceans and by the height of mountains which does not exceed the right measure; finally by the concord of all animals which obey to the law of providence. This proves also that something immutable must have existed before the world” (§33; translation from the Latin version established by Aucher). According to Philo, the consideration of natural phenomena leads us to affirm not only the conservative action of God, but also the initial creative act. But this is too simple, and Philo’s literary challenger and counterpart Alexander (in real life his nephew Tiberius Alexander who had renounced the Jewish faith) does not agree. From among his numerous objections I choose some which are linked to our subject:

(87) “(Tell me, Philo) why has the violence of winds been made if, as you say, all things happen according to providence? Perhaps for the very reason that the sea moves heavily and that those die who travel by sea or are saved merely by chance and effort? Those, on the other hand, who live on the land also lack of necessary things and suffer severe hunger, when standing crops and trees being shaken by winds loss their fruits in a yet unripe state. And it happens also that severe aridity caused by hot winds kills all plants e.g. at spring when the fiery wind from the south approaches suddenly.

(88) Now, considering the frequency of rain, I think it is nonsense to affirm that God provides for all. Rain falls over wide oceans without any utility and also over deserts and other unfruitful land. Often rains occur at the wrong time and cause much harm, so that winter turns to spring and summer turns to winter. But let’s concede that rain is rather useful. And hail? And snow? Are they of any advantage for plants and animals?”

Philo answers Alexander – patiently and somewhat laboriously:

“(99, translation by F.H. Colson from the Greek fragment conserved in Eusebius) Storms of wind and rain were made by God, not as you supposed, to do grievous harm to voyagers and husbandmen, but to benefit our race as a whole. For He purges the earth with water and the whole sublunary region with breezes. And with both He gives sustenance, growth and maturity to animals and plants. If these sometimes harm persons who travel by sea out of season or tillers of the land there is nothing wonderful. They are but a small fraction and His care is for the whole human race. So then as the course of training in the gymnasium is drawn up for the benefit of the pupils, but the gymnasiarch sometimes to suit civic requirements makes a change in the arrangement of the regular hours whereby some of those under training lose their lesson, so too God having the charge of the whole world as though it were a city is wont to create wintry summers and spring-like winters for the benefit of the whole, even

though some skippers and workers on the land are bound to suffer loss through the irregular way in which they occur.”

3.1.2. Minucius Felix, ‘Octavius’

Minucius Felix with his dialogue “Octavius” belongs to the apologists of ancient Christianity. Among his many arguments in favour of the wisdom of the Creator and the Conservator of the world Minucius develops something like a ‘geography of compensatory distribution’:
“God cares not only for the whole but also for the parts (of universe). Britain lacks of sun, but the tepid temperature of the surrounding sea compensates this disadvantage. The Nile mitigates Egypt’s dryness. And the Euphrates indemnifies Mesopotamia for the lack of rainfall. Farther to the East, the Indus river provides, as one says, seed and water. Now, if you entered in a house and if you saw all things well disposed, nicely ranged and trimmed, you would take for granted that the master ruling it is even more excellent than all things you see. So be sure: in the house of the world in which you recognize in the sky and on the earth much wise caution, order and regularity, there is also a Lord and Father of the universe who is more beautiful than even the stars and all several parts of the whole world.” (18,3-4; translation O.S.)

We may find these considerations somewhat naive, we may be charmed also by their humanity and their emotional participation. Anyway, they express a religious quest for sense, in other words a quest for providence by a very concrete look at natural, climatic, phenomena.

3.2 Scholasticism and Reformation

I would just mention two other important epochs for the further development of the idea of providence in western theology. During the 13th century Aristotelian philosophy penetrated medieval scholasticism, e.g. in the work of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. It is Arabian philosophy and theology which played the important role of mediator in this cultural transfer. Aristotelism (in its ancient Greek and its Arabian form) values empirical data and this means the observation of nature. Consequently this philosophical current contributes to the development of the doctrine of providence. A similar statement applies to the 16th century Protestant Reformation, particularly to its humanist representatives. Melancthon dealt with ‘*vestigia Dei in natura*’ – the traces of God in nature – in an exhaustive manner. The Zurich Reformation leader Huldrych Zwingli was the author of a special treatise about providence which referred to the antique traditions we cited and completed them by personal examples chosen from the animal kingdom (cf. Krolzik, *Säkularisierung*, p. 55sq.). Finally, John Calvin, in his “Institution of Christian Faith” (book I, chapter XVI and XVII) presents a vigorous plea for the action of divine Providence in natural phenomena, in a way clearly opposed to determinism and fatalism and stressing faith and responsibility: Providence is not an explanatory theory of the universe, but an existential interpretation of human life understood as a confident and active answer to God manifested as the Creator and Saviour of the world (cf. Bühler, *Prédestination et Providence*, p. 1194sq.).

3.3 Physicotheology at the epoch of Enlightenment

The tradition of physicotheology, which was a very important current in the 17th and 18th centuries, has been rather forgotten and even denied in our own time. Physicotheology is exposed in treatises known at that time by very many readers and written by theologians with good scientific credentials or by scientists interested in theology. In these works the progress of knowledge in geography and in science is interpreted theologically in terms of increasing evidence of providence.

One example is the so-called “Hydrotheology”(1734) of Johann Albert Fabricius, a theologian living in Hamburg. This work summarizes and popularizes the knowledge of that time about physical properties of water and about the importance of water for climate and landscape. Fabricius informs the reader of Halley’s experiments on evaporation and of the extrapolations of his results to the loss of water by evaporation in the Mediterranean sea. In an exhaustive manner he deals with “the movement of water in the air, in the sea and in rivers”. He describes hydrological and geological cycles, the movement of clouds, marine currents, the tide, the velocity of current water and sinking and rising water levels in lakes and rivers. Fabricius shows “how the different physical properties of water combine in a senseful way in order to form a hydrological cycle”. He stresses also the significance of observed data like the distribution of continental and marine water and of mountains for the interactions of climate and vegetation (Krolzik, p. 142).

A salient aspect of Fabricius’ work and, more generally, of physicotheology, is the differentiated representation of interaction in nature as a whole. The Creator reveals himself in every individual creature but even more through the cooperation of all parts of nature: “We experience joy when we look at every one of all creatures and when we consider them for every one of their properties. There is none which does not give us reasons for wondering about the magnitude of the works of the Lord... So we found so many beautiful and splendid things referring to the one creature of water; each of them is able to delight the eyes of reason and to incite our hearts to admiring pleasure and to the praise of the Lord. But nothing else might move us more in this way than the combined consideration of all the properties of water (which we dealt with in former chapters) and of its beneficial relation to the other creatures from which it receives helpful influences permitting water to be conserved and to be useful for others” (Fabricius, *Hydrotheologie*, I,30, according to Krolzik, p. 143).

Reason and heart are concerned, according to Fabricius, reason and faith, we could say; scientific knowledge joins with faithful participation – in other words with an experience of resonance.

Nevertheless, physicotheology is the final point of an evolution. The parallel consideration of rather differentiated scientific assertions and rather schematic theological affirmations seems hybrid and curious to us. Increasingly with time, the pious utterances appeared to be superfluous. There is also a somewhat forced finalism and an affected optimism in physicotheology. So Voltaire in his “Candide” could very easily mock at what he calls “metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology”: “It is proved, says (Pangloss), that things cannot be otherwise than they are; all things have been created to an end, so necessarily the whole has been ordained to the best end. As you can see, noses have been created in order to support glasses; and for this reason we have glasses. Legs have visibly been shaped in order to fit to shoes; and for this reason we put on shoes. Stones have been formed in order to be cut and to build castles with them... Etc.” Candid physicotheology could not resist this mordant irony.

Nevertheless physicotheology is one of the ancestors of modern ecology. Linnaeus had this theological background, quite naturally, and also, as we mentioned already, Alexander von Humboldt and his biogeography.

For a modern perspective we have to ask in which form the theological intention of the doctrine of providence can be reformulated without becoming trapped by the dead-ends of traditional approaches. In what way can we introduce reflections on experiences of resonance and absurdity in a dialogue with today’s research about global ecosystems and global change?

4 New approaches to the doctrine of providence under the conditions of global change

A famous etching of the Dutch artist Escher, “The waterfall”, expresses the everlasting existential fascination emerging from the life cycle. In his typical manner of optical illusion Escher represents falling water pushing a mill-wheel and flowing on down a channel – until it arrives again above the wheel... On the left hand and in the lower part of the picture, in a kind of garden, we look at marine organisms. In the background we see terraces with trees and other cultures, a productive landscape shaped by humans. How may we interpret these allusions? I think that Escher represents life as a force which permanently renews itself – a force just as improbable as the waterfall in the centre of the picture. If this approach is right, the marine organisms represent natural evolution, in other words the evolutionary path of life on earth since its origin 3,5 milliard of years ago (or even more). And the landscape characterized by agriculture represents the constructive potential of human land use if it is inspired by natural evolution. It is a picture of benevolent providence, of experiences of resonance: this appears in the contemplative attitude of the man leaning backwards against a wall. And there are experiences of absurdity also: that is the meaning, in my opinion, of the scene with the clothes-line, the gloomy character of reproductive work (assumed by women!), daily grind, the treadmill of life... I say this without despising in any way those who wash clothes (that is my own task in my household).

Why do I refer to Escher’s picture? More than a conceptual approach the artist’s liberty allows us to confront the miracle of life and the experience of resonance inherent in life. Without using the concept of providence, Escher expresses the quest for providence as an actual challenge. This actual challenge of the quest for providence exists in a speculative and in a practical sense.

4.1 Speculative approaches of a renewed doctrine of providence

There is an essential requirement concerning the idea of providence expressed in relation to research on ecosystems: this requirement is the overcoming of the deterministic perspective of the 19th century. It is necessary to introduce a dimension of play, of undetermined options.

An example of such an approach - an extreme example - is the Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock. Lovelock considers the earth (more precisely the biosphere) as a hyperorganism able to organize and to regulate itself. Several examples (such as the salinity of the oceans) are used to illustrate the homeostatic regulation of global ecosystems. Methods and terms are new, but Lovelock expresses the essential intention of the classical stoic doctrine of providence. In stoic philosophy, Reason (the Logos) is the guarantee of universal balance and of universal orientation; in Lovelock’s approach, the place of Logos is occupied by Gaia, this is the biosphere in the sense of a system analogous to organisms. The religious implications of the Gaia hypothesis are very considerable when this view meets our quest for sense. Gaia represents a mother-like carefulness which is comparable to the father-like providence of monotheistic religions. Many critical remarks have been made regarding Gaia, concerning the plausibility of the hypothesis itself and concerning the danger of a totalitarian ideology. This danger is perceptible in Lovelock’s own positions, although in a discrete manner; it is much more evident in the claims of some of his followers.

If we want to remain in the major current of systemic research, we have to mention the theory of open systems developed by Prigogine and his colleagues. This theory has met much sympathetic interest in theological circles, and this interest is motivated by the purpose of the

classical doctrine of providence. Prigogine's fundamental attitude is totally different to that of 19th century thermodynamics, postulating a depressing fatalism attached to the scenario of a universe striving to thermic death. Nowadays very different scenarios strike the imagination of average academics like me: after several billions of years our universe seems to be led to reproduce itself or to produce a new collateral universe. Is this a real comfort for human beings whose life extends to 70 years, perhaps to 80 years, as according to Psalm 90? I think it is, for it is important for us that creative conservation and renewal are stronger – in the long term – than sickness and death. This view represents the experience of resonance in the sense of *Providentia*, in today's categories and in a speculative approach.

4.2 Practical approaches of a renewed doctrine of providence.

Over recent years, religious institutions, religious communities and their members, also interreligious initiatives and ecumenical councils, developed what we could call practical approaches of a modern faith in providence. They try to make their contribution to ecological responsibility according to their religious traditions.

“Stewardship” is the central term used in this context by Jewish, Christian and Muslim theology and ethics. Stewardship means the role of humankind as a representative and executor of divine providence. The idea of stewardship has biblical roots in Genesis (1,28; 2,15): placed in the Garden of Eden, Man receives the mandate “to cultivate it and guard it”. The classical doctrine of providence expressed this idea by the comparison with vicarious or representative forms of executive authority: Humankind is like a governor appointed by the divine King, like a vice-king, a *vicaire de Dieu* and *image de la Providence* (Calvin), a “father in a family” (Calvin). All these metaphors mean a highly responsible active part in the execution of the providential disposition of earthly creation.

The practical consequences of stewardship concern worship, personal lifestyle and social ethics. I would like to conclude by two examples. The first one refers to the Ecumenical Council of Churches (WCC), the second to US religious communities.

4.2.1 The WCC: Global change and the “integrity of creation”

Since the early eighties, the World Council of Churches proclaimed a world-wide process in favour of “justice, peace and the integrity of creation”. This ecumenical process comprised an important European encounter in Basel in 1989 and a world assembly in Seoul in 1990. The final paper of the Seoul assembly contains a series of important affirmations and commitments, in other words practical consequences. Climatic change is a major issue of these assemblies. So we find among the commitments an annual 3% reduction in energy consumption for industrialized countries, assuming that a global annual reduction of 2% is necessary to obtain a certain stabilization in the middle of the 21st century and that poorly developed countries have a legitimate claim to produce to a higher level because they cannot yet reduce their energy consumption. In Switzerland this 3% reduction target was popularized by an ecumenical campaign calling for self-commitment signatures. More than ten years later, the real impact of these initiatives seems much more limited than that imagined at the time. But this is the general destiny of all enthusiastic initiatives in the world and does not mean that we can live without enthusiasm.

4.2.2 An interfaith call for energy conservation and climate justice (USA, May 2001)

In an open letter addressed to President Bush of 18th May 2001, Jewish and Christian religious leaders representing 80 millions of Americans developed what we could call a “practical providence”. I would like to cite some excerpts of this letter.

“-*Conservation and Stewardship of God’s Creation*

... Because we are called to ‘till land to tend the garden’ (Gen. 2:15), we have a moral obligation to choose the safest, cleanest and most sustainable sources of energy to protect and preserve God’s creation. Energy conservation is faithful stewardship.

-*Conservation and Responsibility to Future Generations*

The gifts of God’s creation are to be conserved over time for all of God’s children. ‘This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations’ (Gen 9:12). Humankind has a fundamental choice of priorities for its future. By depleting energy sources, causing global warming, fouling the air with pollution, and poisoning the land with radioactive waste, a policy of increased reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear power jeopardizes health and well-being for life on Earth. On the other hand, by investing in clean technology, renewable energy, greater vehicle fuel efficiency and safer power plants we help assure sustainability for God’s creation and God’s justice. Energy conservation is intergenerational responsibility.

- *Conservation and Justice*

... Energy conservation is justice for all peoples and nations.

- *Conservation, Prudence, and Precaution*

... Energy conservation is prudent human action.

- *Conservation in the Age of Global Warming*

These concerns have entirely unprecedented moral urgency in the 21st century. In its reliance on fossil fuels, American energy policy is a cause of global climate change. With less than 5% of the world’s population, our nation is generating more than 22% of greenhouse gas emissions. The United States has a moral responsibility to lead a transition to a new sustainable global energy system...”

5 Conclusion

The quest for providence represents a permanent existential and religious dimension in the approach to global change. Classical formulations of this approach, even those left us by ancient Greek and Latin philosophers and theologians, allow us to reflect on our own experiences of resonance and of absurdity in relation to global life conditions and global change. The way that we proceed in this field of investigation has to take into account the irreducibly ambivalent character of these experiences (resonance *and* absurdity), the irreducibly subjective character of conviction (or faith) and the advances in scientific evidence and the conceptual framework. So the contemporary quest for providence will necessarily be different from its classical expressions. Nevertheless it remains a challenge relevant today on both a speculative and a practical level.

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