

# The planetary man.

## Nature and visions in post-Christian cosmologies

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**Abstract.** *Despite evidence of a biblical influence on the anthropocentric model of man's dominance over nature, some trends of Christian thought dialogue with the contemporary philosophical and anthropological insights on nature and human relationship with it. Beside Pope Francis' relevant contribution to the debate on climate change and anthropocentrism at large, and his call for integral ecology, other Christian experiences are of great interest in this regard. The article focuses on the work of an Italian Catholic thinker who anticipated some of the current theoretical questions about Anthropocene, and envisioned a novel post-Christian, generally post-religious and even post-cultural, cosmology which is worth to investigate. In L'uomo planetario (The Planetary Man) (1985), Ernesto Balducci presents a vision*

*of human interdependence with nature, echoing themes later explored by posthumanist anthropology. Balducci advocates for transcending the human-centered view of nature as a separate object, and embracing a planetary consciousness, urging a re-evaluation of the human-nonhuman relationship. His perspective, which predates current onto-ecological debates, underscores the urgency of overcoming anthropocentrism and embracing a holistic approach to environmental stewardship. Balducci's vision aligns astonishingly with Chakrabarty's concept of the "planetary age" and resonates with his argument on overcoming sustainability toward planetary habitability. Revisiting Balducci's insights, we can find inspiration in our constant search for new visionary visions of nature and our place within it.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Through a dialogue between Christian theological thought and contemporary ontological and anthropological debates on *nature*, Anthropocene, and posthumanism, this article focuses on the neglected work of Italian Catholic thinker Ernesto Balducci. By revisiting Balducci's planetary cosmology and critique of anthropocentrism, it aims to reflect on how overlooked religious, ethical, and philosophical traditions can reshape our understanding of the human-nonhuman relationship. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing interdisciplinary research dedicated to exploring innovative cultural, social, and ecological paradigms capable of transcending disciplinary boundaries and intellectual orthodoxies and addressing the challenges of our planetary age.

## **2. Nature and creation**

Descola (2005) points to Christianity and its idea of creation as the cultural root of the modern Western dualistic conception of an objective nature opposed to a subjective humanity. His words are particularly pregnant and thought provoking:

For the nature of the Moderns to come into being, a second operation of purification was necessary: humans had to become external to nature and superior to it. Christianity was responsible for this second upheaval, with

its twofold idea of man's transcendence and a universe created from nothingness by God's will. The Creation bears witness to the existence of God and to his goodness and perfection, but his works were not to be confused with him, nor were the beauties of nature to be appreciated for themselves. They proceed from God, but God is not present in them. Given that a human being, too, is a creature, his significance stems from that founding event. His place in nature is therefore not that of an element like any other; he is not, by nature, as plants and animals are. He has become transcendent in the physical world; his essence and his coming-to-be are matters of God's grace, which is beyond nature (Descola, 2013, p. 66).

Despite the evidence of a biblical influence on the anthropocentric model of man's dominion over nature, the traditional "conservative somnolence" (Lanternari, 2003, p. 356) of the Christian Churches on ecological issues<sup>1</sup>, and the long-standing Christian cultural hegemony over Western modernity, I consider Descola's statement an oversimplification. Francis of Assisi's redefinition of Christ's message about God as father, though largely subaltern within Medieval theology, established a universal egalitarian fraternity including nonhuman agents, including *creatures*. A kinship relationship between men, plants, and animals evidently interlacing with the animist and totemist conceptions. This is the basis of my first questioning of Descola's statement that Christianity set an unbridgeable distance between natural and supernatural entities. The anthropomorphism that is central to all Descola's ontologies except the naturalist one (Sahlins, 2014) is quite patent in Francis' personification of sun, water, and death, but is also traceable almost everywhere in both canonical and subaltern Catholic myths and rituals.

Syncretic animistic rituals in traditional (and current) Catholicism reveal often a fascinating religious ambivalence between saints and animals, where the sacred and the natural intertwine within a nonhuman dimension. These rituals, which incorporate animals into religious celebrations, patently evoke ancient, pre-

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<sup>1</sup> Within the Christian world some critical voices during the 20<sup>th</sup> century denounced this "somnolence," and even a direct guilt of Christianity for the environmental crisis (White 1967), especially from within the charismatic spiritualist movement, and groups such as the "Eleventh Commandment Fellowship," to take a radical example, preached a new theology of nature and practiced a reconsideration of Christian life in anti-modernist and ecological terms (Lucas 1995). A general and critical review of the relationship between Christianity and ecology can be found in the monumental work edited by Hessel and Ruether (2000). More recently, Sean McGrath (2019) has interestingly redefined Christian contribution to the ecological debate in terms of "negative ecology".

Christian practices, but highlights as well how Catholicism, even in its liturgies, has absorbed elements of animism. As ethnographic examples related to my own experience, I mention here two feasts celebrated in Abruzzo, Italy: the feast of Saint Anthony the Abbot, involving farm animals and particularly pigs, and the feast of San Domenico, featuring snakes.

A symbolic overlap between Saint Anthony the Abbot and the pig is quite evident in the ritual as it is performed in rural Abruzzo. The feast of the Saint is celebrated yearly on January 17th, according to the official Catholic calendar. The saint is openly connected with animals, as documented also in the liturgical blessing of livestock carried out by the priest either in the church itself or on the church porch, and particularly with the pig, which is even represented alongside him in the sacred effigies. The poignancy of this animal's role within the local economic and ecologic system is transposed to the metaphysical level by the transfiguration into the venerated Saint. Interestingly, while the past ritual was more complex, the current "re-invented" tradition centers around food sharing involving the entire community. On the feast night, a large fire is set in the central square, and people gather to eat roasted pork sausages and drink wine. This ritual pork-sharing is emically maintained as a means of community bonding, and as a tradition to preserve the community's identity, but it also reshapes the global-local sociocultural dynamics (Della Costa, 2020). Still, it demonstrates a clear cultural and symbolic connection between the saint and the pig as mythical/ritual agent.

Celebrated in Cocullo, in the same mountain area of Abruzzo, the feast of San Domenico involves the handling of live snakes. Worshippers drape snakes around the statue of the saint parading through the village, followed by the local clergy and the faithful, and recalling Domenico's mythical powers of healing and protection from snakebites. Snakes, traditionally feared or revered as symbols of danger and fertility, become an active part of a ritual in which they are a core agent of the sacred practice. This ambivalence of divine and natural elements liturgically reflects the saint's role as a mediator between humanity and the wild, untamed forces of nature. Mythically, it reflects the veneration, through the figure of the saint, of the spiritual presence of the animal: a deeply symbolical and ecological connection between human and nonhuman beings sharing the same environment (see Di Nola, 1976). In both cases, animals embody not just a creaturely objectification of God's distant power, but a fundamental sacred entity in the ritual redefinition of ecological interaction among creatures.

By the same token, Pope Francis, in his 2015 revolutionary encyclical *Laudato si'*, names the earth as sister when denounces: "We have come to see ourselves as

her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (para. 2). Even if from a strictly doctrinal perspective, Pope Francis has entered a greatly hot debate which Catholicism had never consistently faced before <sup>2</sup>: climate change, water issues, loss of biodiversity, global inequality are the topics treated in the encyclical which set the need to dismantle what he calls “a technocratic, undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm” (para. 106), the urgency of a redefinition of a non-anthropocentric human/nonhuman relationship. The international political responses to those challenges, according to Pope Francis’ critical view, are weak and insufficient, thus he invokes an “integral ecology” based on environmental justice. More recently, in October 2023, Pope Francis returned to these subjects, signally the climate change, with an “apostolic exhortation”, titled *Laudate Deum* to pressure the COP23 to be held in Dubai a couple months later. His representation of nature repudiates the modernist separation between men and nature, and dialogues with that envisioned by the most radical environmental thinkers and activists: “the technocratic paradigm can isolate us from the world that surrounds us and deceive us by making us forget that the entire world is a *contact zone* (Pope Francis 2023)”, and here he directly quotes Donna Haraway’s work *When species meet* (2008). It is however worth noting that these positions have not gone uncontested within the Catholic Church, as tensions persist between progressive ecological stances and more conservative currents resistant to reinterpreting doctrinal anthropocentrism (Wilkins 2020; Danielsen *et al.* 2021). The recent election of the new pope, Leo XIV, further adds to the uncertainty, as his position on these ecological controversies and the broader redefinition of humanity’s relationship with nature is yet to be fully understood.

### 3. A new planetarism

Nevertheless, if the Catholic hierarchy has only relatively recently started officially confronting ecological issues, there is a non-hegemonic tradition within the Catholic world that anticipated many themes and approaches of the current political, philosophical, and even anthropological debate. My aim here is to focus on the work of Ernesto Balducci, an Italian Catholic philosopher and activist

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<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1991 that Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus annus*, acknowledged, for the first time in an official document of the Catholic Church, the emergence of an “ecological question”.

who forty years ago<sup>3</sup>, in 1985, published a book entitled *L'uomo planetario* (The Planetary Man).

Ernesto Balducci (1922-1992) was an influential Roman Catholic priest, theologian, and intellectual known for his engagement with contemporary social issues and for advocating a progressive vision of the Church. Born in the small village of Santa Fiora in Tuscany, Balducci was ordained as a priest in 1944, during a period marked by the turmoil of World War II and the antifascist resistance to the Nazi military occupation of Italy. This historical context profoundly shaped his worldview, leading him to engage deeply with themes of peace, justice, and the reformation of Christian doctrine.

Balducci is perhaps best known for his work as a peace activist and a thinker who strived to reconcile Catholic theology with the emerging social and political challenges of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was influenced by the transformative spirit of Vatican II, the ecumenical council convened in the 1960s that sought to modernize the Church's role in the contemporary world. Vatican II encouraged openness to dialogue with other faiths and non-religious perspectives, which resonated deeply with Balducci's own views. He saw this as a turning point for the Church to reorient itself towards human rights, social justice, and the dignity of all people, irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Balducci's most significant contributions lie at the intersection of theology, politics, and ethics. As a prolific writer and public intellectual, he published several books and essays that addressed issues ranging from the Church's role in modern society to the threats posed by nuclear war and environmental destruction. In works like *Il Terzo Millennio* (The Third Millennium) (1981) and *La Terra del Tramonto* (The Land of Sunset) (1992), Balducci argued that humanity was at a crossroads. It could either continue a path of conflict and self-destruction or embrace a new global ethic based on solidarity, peace, and the common good. He saw these challenges as requiring not just political solutions but also a profound spiritual transformation, a "conversion" that called for a new consciousness about humanity's interconnectedness and collective responsibility.

Politically, Balducci was closely aligned with left-wing causes and was an outspoken critic of capitalism and the inequalities it perpetuated. He viewed capitalism as a system that degraded human dignity and fostered social division. His writings on peace were often intertwined with a critique of both Western

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<sup>3</sup> In view of its fortieth anniversary, the book was republished in 2024 (Verona: Gabrielli) by the "Ernesto Balducci Foundation" with the subtitle "Etica laica e fedi religiose sul crinale apocalittico" (Secular ethics and religious faiths on the apocalyptic ridge).

capitalist and Soviet communist ideologies, which he saw as contributing to the Cold War's existential threats. His pacifism was not merely the absence of war, but a call for a structural transformation of society to eradicate violence in all its forms, from military conflict to economic exploitation.

A key theme in Balducci's thought was his emphasis on "planetary consciousness". He argued that humanity must move beyond narrow nationalistic and ethnocentric worldviews towards a global perspective that recognized the interdependence of all people and the planet. This vision was deeply rooted in his religious belief in the unity of the human family under God. However, Balducci was also critical of traditional Church structures, particularly their tendency to cling to dogmatism and hierarchical authority. He advocated for a more democratic and inclusive Church that was open to dialogue with other religions and secular movements.

Focusing more closely on his major work, *L'uomo planetario*, the first consideration concerns the stunning immediate assonance of that title with the ideas more recently proposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018, 2021), yet we can see much more than a lexical similarity between Balducci's work and that of many scholars interpreting the Anthropocene<sup>4</sup>. In a time when ecological problems were not seen as crucial in the intellectual debate, political agenda, and grassroots commonsense, the very core of Balducci's prophetic message, relentlessly repeated in his main publication, in articles, and conferences, was the urgent need to overcome the modern dualism between nature and culture (which Descola would call "ontological dichotomy"). In his words:

Moral consciousness is called, in the atomic age, to a new universality. This universality requires, negatively, the bracketing of history, and, positively, the adoption of species membership as the only sufficient criterion of moral choice. This is a pure and simple reversal of the humanism of which we are the children. (...) Anthropocentrism is a narrow legacy of traditional humanism that has imprinted its limitations even on the Christian reading of the Bible (Balducci, 1985, pp. 11-12)<sup>5</sup>.

The overturning of the Western world's anthropocentric foundations is possible, and even necessary, as the objectual separated nature allegedly ruled by immutable laws "has entered the area of contingency. It is there but may not be there anymore" (p. 8). And "this gives rise to a new form of *pietas*, the content of

<sup>4</sup> I also recommend here the political theory studies of Stefan Pedersen, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of my article. See, for example, Pedersen (2020).

<sup>5</sup> As there is no English version of Balducci's works, all quotes are my translations.

which is loving concern for the species as such and, more generally, for every form of life in which the deep kinship between man and the cosmos is revealed” (p. 12). We all live now “in a planetary age” (1989, p. 27), and Balducci states with astonishing clarity, and several years in advance, what has been just recently accepted by many scholars: “we must educate people to a view of human life as part of an indivisible wholeness whereby it is but a point, a knot in the multifaceted fabric of the biosphere” (p. 27); and finally “the Aristotelian division of life, which hierarchically placed man first, then animals (‘rational beings’) and then plants, is not true” (1988, pp. 19-20).

Juxtaposing to this discourse some recent pages written by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Indian post-colonial scholar, who is quite far from Christian culture, evidences the thematic affinity and the acuity of Balducci’s perspective. To Chakrabarty, there were in history and still are two figures of the human: “the human of humanist histories”, and “the human as a geological agent, whose history could not be recounted from within purely humanocentric views”. Such “doubled figure of the human”, continues the historian, “now requires us to think about how various forms of life, our own and others’, may be caught up in historical processes” that bring together the limited timescale over which we look at our history “with the inhumanly vast timescales of deep history” (2021, p. 3). A “new historical-philosophical entity called the planet” has redefined our age as “planetary” (p. 4).

In the face of the new planetary challenges, we are called to a “new covenant between man and nature”, warns Balducci in 1988. In biblical terms, the “covenant” was stipulated between man and God. Thus, using such a word is not neutral in this context, and testifies the relevance of human-nature relationship in Balducci’s ecoanthropology. Yet, nature does not even transcend humanity. What he is looking for is “a sort of planetary culture, unique and manifold, diverse, encompassing even the physical universe, creatures, things” (Balducci, 1988, p. 20). No finalistic visions are allowed anymore. The goal is to create, co-working on the present, a brand-new revolutionary “species consciousness” (p. 10), which is what might relativize and finally overcome religious and cultural divisions. Balducci, who also was a priest professes himself as “post-Christian”, and even “anti-Christian” (1991, p. 57), and forges a trans-religious cosmology. His planetary cosmology, as Chakrabarty says about planetary history, “decenters the human” (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 4) and resets a novel way for human-nonhuman interaction.

Even the wider concept of culture must be rejected, and Balducci here seems to anticipate also Bruno Latour’s famous statement: “the very notion of culture is

an artifact created by bracketing off Nature” (1993, p.104). To Balducci “the new culture we must foster is one that accepts the mutually integrating relationship between man and nature” (1989, p. 34). As Chakrabarty puts it, “The planetary, disclosing vast processes of unhuman dimensions, cannot be grasped by recourse to any ideal forms” (2021, pp. 86-87). It is not about re-thinking nature, nor is it just about rethinking us as nature. We must rescale humanity.

The asynchronous, unintentional, and seemingly impossible dialogue I am trying to imagine between the Italian Catholic thinker, who died in 1992, and the Indian postcolonial historian becomes even denser and richer at this point.

“To re-establish the alliance with nature, mental, ethical or sentimental attitudes are not enough, we need to change the [economic, political, cultural] structures [...] that are deadly to nature” writes Balducci, “without which ecologism paradoxically plays at conservation”; thus he proposes: “it seems to me that the real attitude is one of respect, which places not man nor nature but life at the center of the life system” (1989, p. 33)<sup>6</sup>. And Chakrabarty, more than thirty years later, answers: “Reverence [toward nature] is not simply about curiosity, wonderment, or biophilia. Reverence suggests a relationship of respect mixed in with fear and awe”, which eventually results in a renewed “spiritual relationship to earth” (2021, p. 198). The reference to Rudolf Otto’s fundamental conception of the holy (1917) as ambivalent and radical otherness is explicit both in Balducci, who recalls world’s finiteness as *fascinosum* and *tremendum* (1985, p. 15), and in Chakrabarty: “[the planet] can reduce us to the sense of an abject creaturehood, so overpowering can be its presence” (2021, p. 198).

According to Balducci’s vision, entropy is a poignant reminder that “the future is finite and is proportionate to the energies we have at our disposal, the same energies that we squander recklessly”; and this is “an important awareness that restores us to a creaturely humility and a sense of the precariousness of being”. He concludes that “we will have” to rediscover a sacredness of the Earth but starting from the perception of its fragility” which humans share (1991, pp. 44-45). In Balducci’s post-theological terms a new “creatural communion” is to be established (1988, p. 20) comprehending all life forms but escaping every imposed categorization. The metaphor of a planetary sacred dimension provides not another ontological form, but the negation of all human models, the subtraction of all human preconceived meanings, and the inauguration of a

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<sup>6</sup> Here a reference to biocentric views is evident, even though Balducci never openly quotes authors as Albert Schweitzer, who introduced the “reverence for life” ethic (1923), and Paul Taylor, known for his *Respect for Nature* (1986), where he argues for the moral worth of all living beings, emphasizing ecological balance and respect for biodiversity.

rescaling of *Homo sapiens* and its world within a planet it only temporarily and precariously inhabits together with a huge number of cohabitants. “With regard to the planet [...] we are no more special than other forms of life. The planet puts us in the same position as any other creature” (p. 90). It is time, and Balducci’s vision is forty years old, for a “planetarization of the [human] species” (1991, p. 48). In other, more contemporary, words, “the humanocentric idea of sustainability will have to speak to the planet-centric idea of habitability” (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 204). The planet is, then, no longer the space of human domination, to be safeguarded for the reproducibility of that domination, but is the “common home” (Balducci 1991, p. 51) for all human and nonhuman creatures.

#### 4. To hope and act *with* creation

Despite facing opposition within the Catholic Church for his progressive views (Balducci was indeed suspended *a divinis* for two years in 1976), he remained committed to his belief that faith should inspire active engagement with the world’s most pressing moral and political issues. His life and work stand as a testament to the potential for religious thought to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of a more just and peaceful world. Today, Balducci’s legacy continues to influence contemporary Catholic thought and activism, especially in the areas of peace and justice. His work resonates with the teachings of figures like Pope Francis, who similarly emphasizes the Church’s role in addressing the current issues of what he too calls “our common home” (2015).

Inspired by Pope Francis, but formally outside the Catholic Church hierarchy, and fully embedded in social dynamics, the *Laudato Si’ Movement* (LSM)<sup>7</sup> is a Catholic community that embodies Ernesto Balducci’s visions. Initially founded in 2015 as the *Global Catholic Climate Movement*, the group rebranded in 2021 to emphasize its commitment to ecological justice and integral ecology. The movement seeks to inspire Catholics worldwide to address the climate crisis and protect the environment, seeing this work as a spiritual and moral imperative. LSM’s activities span various dimensions, including promoting an “ecological conversion”, which primarily involves rethinking humanity’s relationship with nature and encouraging sustainable lifestyles. The movement organizes global initiatives such as *Laudato Si’ Week* and the *Season of Creation*, which promote prayer and action for environmental justice. It also plays a central role in Catholic

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://laudatosimovement.org/>.

fossil fuel divestment efforts and in “calling for bold policies to accomplish the Paris Agreement’s goal of 1.5C and halt biodiversity collapse”, as well as offering educational programs like the *Laudato Si’ Animators* training, empowering local communities to advocate for change. With headquarters in Assisi, Italy, and activities in countries such as Poland, Brazil, and the Philippines, LSM unites clergy, religious, and laypeople, and fosters a deep connection between faith and environmental stewardship, emphasizing that “everything is interconnected”, as highlighted in the 2015 encyclical.

The 2024 edition of the “Season of Creation” run from September 1 to October 4, concluding with the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and its theme, “To Hope and Act with Creation”, emphasized the *co-creatureness* of human and nonhuman beings inspired by the biblical concept of hope. To explain such a core message, as one can read in their website, LSM suggested a salient representation: “In the letter of Paul the apostle to the Romans, the biblical image pictures the Earth as a Mother, groaning as in childbirth (Rom 8:22)”<sup>8</sup>. The theological interpretation of this passage was re-signified in non-anthropocentric terms. Nature is not an inert body to be sanctified by the delivery of a spiritual humanity. Its sufferance is the present of all creatures. “Along with our Sister, Mother Earth, creatures of all kinds, including humans, cry out because of the consequences of our destructive actions causing climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and human suffering as well as Creation’s suffering”. The “*grand partage*” between creatures is not compatible with this post-Christian theological approach. And even more: hope is about the co-creation of a planetary future. “To hope in a biblical context does not mean to stand still and quiet, but rather groaning, crying, and actively striving for new life amidst the struggles”. Thus, “just as in childbirth, we go through a period of intense pain, but new life springs forth. [...] Only when we work together with Creation can *the firstfruits of hope* be born”. The place of man, as in Balducci’s prophecy, as well as in posthumanist anthropology, is decentered: “Creation is not given to humanity to use and abuse, rather, humanity is created to be part of Creation”<sup>9</sup>.

This does not mean that Descola was wrong about a long hegemonic Christian culture being co-responsible for the anthropocentric divide. In western naturalist ontology, which Christianity contributed to shape, man is actually “au-delà de la nature”, as he writes. Yet the ontologizing of categories generally risks forgetting

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<sup>8</sup> <https://seasonofcreation.org/>, “Mother” is capitalized in the original.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations above are taken from LMS website, at the page <https://laudatosimovement.org/news/soc-2024-to-hope-and-act-with-creation/>.

about internal positionalities, subaltern plurality, and historical change. It is the apocalyptic perspective, the reconsideration of time as finite, the contingency of human history, as Balducci put it, that in the contemporary Christian world restores the creature-feeling, repositions man among creatures, within creation.

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