

Reframing Theological Anthropology for an Ecological Age—Synopsis



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How should theologians respond to human actions that threaten the sustainability of life by polluting the air, land and water, accelerating the rate of species extinction, degrading and destroying ecological systems, and forcing changes on the global climate that are especially adverse for poor and vulnerable people? In the **2014 Annual Faculties Convocation of the WTC**, Jame Schaefer, systematic theologian and ethicist at Marquette University, urged us to question how we think, teach, and write about the human person so our theological anthropology is responsive to the ecological signs of our time. Considering the human person as *imago Dei* as explored by a plethora of theologians, *homo faber* as Teilhard de Chardin underscored, and the duo “co-creators” and “stewards” preferred by the U.S. Catholic bishops seem to fall short as the sustainability is increasingly jeopardized. More promising are Philip Hefner’s “created co-creator” and Sallie McFague’s “super, natural Christians.” *Yet none is clearly motivational or descriptive of the type of human behavior that is needed today.* Theological anthropology must be reformed, Schaefer argued, and essential to this task is taking seriously basic scientific evidence of the emergence of homo sapiens within the 13.7 billion year history of the universe.

For a theological anthropology that is responsive to our imperiled planet, Schaefer identified **five criteria** that must be met for thinking about and orienting human behavior: (1) The humility of our species as late arrivals in the history of the universe; (2) our species relatedness to and dependence upon other species and *abiota* of the ecological systems within which we function; (3) the dignity and distinctiveness of each human as an informed decision-maker who has a stake in the sustainability of Earth and who must demonstrate concern for poor and vulnerable people who are most adversely affected; (4) the basic motivation for acting, and (5) broad guidelines for acting responsibly.

When searching for a model that meets these criteria, Schaefer was inspired by teachings of Thomas Aquinas to conceptualize the human as “**a virtuous cooperator.**” This model conveys the understanding that human cooperation with one another and other Earth creatures sustains the internal functioning of the world as a way of cooperating with God who sustains the entire universe in existence and offers grace to humans to be cooperative. The virtuous cooperator prudently makes and executes informed decisions, relates justly to other creatures for the common good of all--the

sustainability of Earth's systems, curbs the desire for consuming more than the necessities of life, and is courageous about acting prudently, justly, and moderately. Motivating the virtuous cooperator is love for one's neighbor out of love for God and desire to give glory to God in this life in anticipation of eternal happiness.

The virtuous cooperator model has additional benefits for a reformed theological anthropology. This model (1) does not confuse God with creatures because, as Aquinas explained, God is the primary cause who makes the world possible while humans are secondary causes interacting with other secondary causes who act on *abiota*, (2) does not reduce the human to a technologist, and (3) does not assume that recent emergents in the universe manage ecological systems but instead manage ourselves as cooperators who intentionally cooperate with other living and inanimate constituents of Earth—God's creation.