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# Three Whales on Whom the World Rests: God, Creation and Symbols

## Trīs vaļi, uz kuriem balstās pasaule: Dievs, radība un simboli

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The article deals with wide scope of issues dealt within the current NORDPLUS project – interpretation of climate symbols against the background of current environmental changes. Facts describing global warming due to human activity are provided. Development of ecotheology is shortly introduced by description of criticism of the Western Christianity being partially responsible for neglect towards nature. Anthropological resources of the Eastern Orthodox Christian approach to ecology are marked by excerpts from Social Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church. Difference between “dominion” and “stewardship” in human attitude towards nature is described on basis of linguistic analysis of respective texts from Genesis. Interface between nature and humanity is activated by use of symbols, and changes in environment cause subsequent shift in both interpretation and use of those symbols. Traditional symbols undergo ambiguous process of application in religion, art and daily use. Examples of modern environmentally-caring art are analyzed.

**Key words:** ecotheology, global warming, human impact, interpretation of the Bible, dominion, stewardship, symbols (use of)

### Definition of Climate Change

Climate change is caused by factors that include oceanic processes (such as oceanic circulation), variations in solar radiation received by Earth, plate tectonics and volcanic eruptions, and human-induced alterations of the natural world; these latter effects are currently causing global warming.

Forcing mechanisms can be either “internal” or “external”. Internal forcing mechanisms are natural processes within the climate system itself (e.g., the thermohaline circulation). External forcing mechanisms can be either natural (e.g., changes in solar output) or anthropogenic (e.g., increased emissions of greenhouse gases). Very often “climate change” is used to describe human-specific impacts and consequently it is causing imbalance in relationships between humans and nature. The term sometimes is used to refer specifically to climate change caused by human activity, as

opposed to changes in climate that may have resulted as part of Earth's natural processes. These changes are caused and they themselves facilitate changes in chemical composition of water, industrial use of lands and forests, and changes in biodiversity. These natural changes are inevitable.

Whether the initial forcing mechanism is internal or external, the response of the climate system might be fast (e.g., a sudden cooling due to airborne volcanic ash reflecting sunlight), slow (e.g., thermal expansion of warming ocean water), or a combination (e.g., sudden loss of albedo in the arctic ocean as sea ice melts, followed by more gradual thermal expansion of the water). Therefore, the climate system can respond abruptly, but the full response to forcing mechanisms might not be fully developed for centuries or even longer.

### **Natural Causes and Human Activity in Climate Change**

The Godard Institute for Space Studies (GISS, NASA) claims that “the January–November 2010 surface temperature anomalies are the warmest in their 131 year analysis period” and that “global warming amounts to 0.8°C over the past century, with the largest warming in remote regions including high latitudes”. A 0.8°C rise is also reported by the University of East Anglia Climate Research Unit.<sup>1</sup> The UK Met Office reports that “the UK has experienced nine of the 10 warmest years on record since 1990”. They admit that global temperature rise virtually stopped during 2000 – 2010, but state that this is not regarded as an end to warming<sup>2</sup>.

*Ca.* 800 mill. of tons of Carbon dioxide are thrown out in the atmosphere daily.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the UN that provides regular reports of the state of knowledge on climate change in its 2007 Report stated: “World temperatures could rise by between 1.1 and 6.4°C during the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Solar output**

The sun is the predominant source for energy input to the Earth. Both long and short term variations in solar intensity are known to affect global climate. Three to four billion years ago the sun emitted only 70% as much power as it does today. If the atmospheric composition had been the same as today, liquid water should not have existed on Earth. However, there is evidence for the presence of water on the early Earth, leading to what is known as the faint young Sun paradox. Hypothesized solutions to this paradox include a vastly different atmosphere, with much higher concentrations of greenhouse gases than currently exist. Over the following approximately 4 billion years, the energy output of the sun increased and atmospheric composition changed. The Great Oxygenation Event – oxygenation of the atmosphere around 2.4 billion years ago – was the most notable alteration. Over the next five billion years the sun's ultimate death as it becomes a red giant and then a white dwarf will have large effects on climate, with the red giant phase possibly ending any life on Earth that survives until that time.

Solar output also varies on shorter time scales, including the 11-year solar cycle and longer-term modulations. Solar intensity variations are considered to have been influential in triggering the Little Ice Age, and some of the warming observed from 1900 to 1950. Research indicates that solar variability has had effects including the Maunder Minimum from 1645 to 1715 A.D. (when sunspots became exceedingly rare),

part of the Little Ice Age from 1550 to 1850 A.D., which was marked by relative cooling and greater glacier extent than the centuries before and afterward. Some studies point toward solar radiation increases from cyclical sunspot activity affecting global warming, and climate may be influenced by the sum of all effects.

### **Greenhouse Gases and anthropological warming**

The major GHG (Greenhouse Gases) are about 7600 ppm for water vapour, 390 ppm for CO<sub>2</sub>, and 1780 ppb for methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) (ppm = parts per million by volume, ppb = parts per billion by volume). Ozone and Nitrous Oxide have smaller concentrations. It is claimed that these translate to a greenhouse warming effect of 36-70% for water vapour, 9-26% for CO<sub>2</sub>, and 4-9% for CH<sub>4</sub>.<sup>4</sup> Note that CH<sub>4</sub> is about eighty times stronger as a greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>, but it is present in much smaller concentrations.

Research shows that CO<sub>2</sub> has had a cyclic variation (period approx. 100 000 years). This natural climatic variation may be due in part to the 100 000 year period of the eccentricity of the earth's orbit.<sup>5</sup>

The research shows also that each peak in the cycle levelled at approximately 278 ppm until the industrial revolution around 1800. Since then, the CO<sub>2</sub> level has increased dramatically, reaching 390 ppm in 2010. This recent 40% increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> appears to be a sudden departure from the natural variation, with the implication that *human activity is responsible for global warming* (called "anthropogenic warming"). Moreover, assuming different levels of human economic development, population growth, and fossil-fuel use, IPCC predictions for atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels lie between 500 ppm and 900 ppm by 2100.

Climate skeptics claim solar irradiance is the main driving force for increasing temperatures, not CO<sub>2</sub>. This claim is countered by the UK Met Office: "Changes in solar activity do affect global temperatures, but research shows that, over the last 50 years, increased greenhouse gas concentrations have a much greater effect than changes in the Sun's energy".

The main causes of concentrations of certain greenhouse gases during last 50 years are burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. Certainly, carbon emissions have increased dramatically since 1950. Majority of climate scientists agree with this position and it has been endorsed by more than 50 scientific societies and academies of science.

The UK Met Office states: "It is now clear that man-made greenhouse gases are causing climate change".

### **The consequences**

According to the IPCC view, the *physical* consequences of warming are catastrophic: e.g., increased drought, flooding, and severe storms. Certainly some effects associated with climate change have been observed over the last century:

1. The world warmed by 0.6-0.8°C,
2. Gulf Stream slow-down could plunge the USA and NW Europe into cold and drought,
3. Most glaciers retreated since about 1850,
4. Sea level rose about 7 inches,
5. Water tables fell significantly (China: 1.5m/year, India: 1-3m/year),

6. Malaria has spread to higher altitudes,
7. At least 279 species of plants and animals are moving closer to the poles.

The *social* consequences are summarised in a few key reports:

1. “An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for United States National Security” (Pentagon Report, 2003) points to possible “catastrophic droughts, famines and riots, with skirmishes over food and water, mass migration and economic disruption. Starvation and disease will decrease population size”.<sup>6</sup>
2. “The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change” (2006) says “climate change will affect the basic elements of life (water, food production, health and the environment). Hundreds of millions of people could be affected by coastal flooding”.<sup>7</sup>

### Examples of Recent Severe Weather Events

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2011 made new weather records. NOAA announced that there were 12 different weather disasters that each cost more than \$1 billion at the time of the event (in USA). The previous record was nine in 2008. Such events included blizzards, wildfires and tornadoes. NOAA claims that the US has sustained 134 weather or climate disasters since 1980 where overall damages reached or exceeded \$1 billion.<sup>8</sup>

Reuters claim that such extreme weather events are increasing globally, and global reinsurer Munich RE claims that natural disaster losses for the first 9 months of 2011 totalled \$310 billion. It is interesting to note that global weather catastrophes appear to track global warming, and that there is an indication that such events reached a peak in the 1990's.<sup>9</sup>

### Ecotheology is About Change

Consequently, ecotheology is essentially about change. The change occurs in both nature and human attitude to it. Never before have had human activities influenced an ecosystem of the whole planet Earth.

The question has been put in late 60-ies of the last century when the paradigm-making article was published in 1967 by Lynn White, Jr., Professor of History at the University of California at Los Angeles: “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”.<sup>10</sup> His statements accused Western worldview and Western Christianity in particular for creating “estrangement and consequently instrumental approach” to natural environment. Having said that Western “Western Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects,” White goes on to describe differences between the Western and Eastern Christian worldviews. Quoting well-known nature researchers White argues that exploitation of nature is rooted in development of Western rationalism, technicism since 13<sup>th</sup> century in Europe when “the rainbow was no longer simply a symbol of hope first sent to Noah after the Deluge. Robert Grosseteste, Friar Roger Bacon, and Theodoric of Freiberg produced startlingly sophisticated work on the optics of the rainbow [...]” Science coupled with technologies “gave mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control.”

When the worldview created partially by the Western Christianity was criticized for being responsible for causing ecological crisis, Christians reacted by creating publications dealing with previously nonessential issues. In the pre-industrial era when manufacturing didn't cause threats to nature there was no need for such publications. Now it seems more and more that ecotheology is among the most important aspects of applied theology touching fundamental issues of worldview, religion and human attitude to nature.<sup>11</sup>

*Oikos* – in Greek means “house, household”, and the root word is used in both “economy” and “ecology”. Both words in English (as in any other language) deal with proper maintenance, care and management of resources. Further, *ecotheology* is a term which consists of two more root words, *theos* and *logos*, i.e., theology which speaks about the concept of God attuned to their spiritual and physical living, and making people accountable for their attitude towards nature. Here is the second change we are dealing with in this project: ecotheology is about man's authority over nature as delegated by the Creator. Is he called to responsibility or sheer dominance, cooperation and care (stewardship) rather than hierarchy? Ecotheology rises as an answer of theologians and Church leaders to criticism of the traditional Western theology as caring for personal salvation regardless of its social/ environmental responsibility, offering one-sided interpretation of related biblical texts (particularly from Gen. 1-2).

### **West versus East**

Western worldview according to White comprises estrangement from natural environment and consequently “instrumental” use of it. And this is where the Western Christian approach to nature differs from that of the Eastern Orthodox view:

“The key to the contrast may perhaps be found in a difference in the tonality of piety and thought which students of comparative theology find between the Greek and the Latin Churches. The Greeks believed that sin was intellectual blindness, and that salvation was found in illumination, orthodoxy – that is, clear thinking. The Latins, on the other hand, felt that sin was moral evil, and that salvation was to be found in right conduct. Eastern theology has been intellectualist. Western theology has been voluntarist. The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts.” And the conclusion is obvious: implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere.

Spokesman of the Orthodox view John Chrysavgis<sup>12</sup> agrees with the view of White about the Western Christianity: “We [in the West] have disestablished a continuity between ourselves and the outside, with no possibility for intimate communion and mutual enhancement.” Actually the [Western] emphasis on “autism with regard to the natural cosmos” is his starting point before he enters detailed view of Eastern Orthodoxy on the created nature. He states that the Eastern view is best presented by iconography – not only as art, but as *reality saturated with Divine energies*, represented beyond suffering, solitude, and hell, an image that will never die. Whereas Western approach is characterized as technical and instrumental, the Eastern Orthodox approach offers “inner vision of the world”, and Orthodox iconography “seeks to discover and then to disclose the reality of the experience of the heavenly kingdom in this world.” More than that – “the icon articulates with theological conviction the faith in this kingdom and its activity in the earthly realm [...] The icon constitutes the epiphany of God in the world. [...] The God who created out of love, who was incarnated out of love, now saturates the whole world with divine energies.” Nature was seen as *icon* of Creator.

That position is represented by the view of nature, created world as a symbol of God's omnipresence, love and resurrection. Whole Eastern Orthodox icon art is saturated with this spiritual meaning.

These statements are essential for the current project. They pave the way for further research in how natural objects are used as "symbols". By this opposition of the West and East we have two strata of the use of symbols. The first one carries on the ancient tradition (East); the second – upper one (West) – may be a provocative quote aimed at the conscience of modern man: it's a quest, provocation, rebuke etc. The current project deals with use of those symbols and tries to explain changes in their use. White ascribes "nature as symbolic system through which God speaks to men" to the early Church (e.g., the Early Church fathers say that the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul's aspiration, etc.). In that world the view of nature was essentially "artistic"; and "science as we [in the West] conceive it could scarcely flourish in such an ambience". This quote explains why Eastern Orthodox Christians' approach to global threats to ecology differs from that of Western environmentalists. It is based on "inward" vision of fundamental relationship between God, humans and creation; particularly on general understanding of man as *Image of God* and nature as *icon* of God. This direction is strongly presented in this volume.

By no means Eastern Orthodoxy does deny activism, but rather gives preference to the change worldview prior to outward activism. The document "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" clearly states the priority by saying the following: "**It is impossible to overcome the ecological crisis in the situation of a spiritual crisis.**" This does not mean that the Church calls to curtail the preservation activity, but in her hope for a positive change in the man-nature relationships, she relies rather on society's aspiration for spiritual revival. The anthropogenic background of ecological problems shows that we tend to change the world around us in accordance with our own inner world; therefore, the transformation of nature should begin with the transformation of the soul. According to St. Maximus the Confessor, man can turn the earth into paradise only if he carried paradise in himself" (see Appendix no.3).<sup>13</sup>

This shift of focus point doesn't seem important to many. For example, Latvia internationally is usually presented as an ecologically "green" country in Europe but with few or no threats caused by typical enemies of nature: heavy industry, pesticides and population. Ironically the current economical situation in Latvia is reducing the threat!<sup>14</sup> With the former Soviet industry long gone and the country now standing still before another wave of industrial development has relative "peace" – which makes people feel ecologically safe and careless. Authorities and business people are asking for more industries, for more active use of the land, deforestation, fishing in the Baltic Sea etc. in the name of faster economic development of the country. Although "ecothology" has been recognized as "reaction of the Church to severe criticism for being passive, laid-back and, above all, responsible for creating an irresponsible worldview" already since late 1960-ies, it is still difficult to convince the audience to accept that shift in theology. Students argue that it is a "liberal<sup>15</sup> approach to theology", because the "true Kingdom of God is up there" (with finger pointing upwards), or they say they never heard about the term before (in April 2012). This is why environmental activism is more assertive than reflections in ecotheology.

## Nature, Climate Situation and God of the Bible

Much scholarly attention focuses on certain biblical concepts that speak of having dominion, to subdue; and the ideal relationship of humanity to nature, and on the corresponding interpretive issues that reappear again and again in theological and philosophical thought.

### Separation, hostility, punishment and pain

As the crowning point of Creation, God creates male and female in “His” image. It is in Genesis 1:28 that the crucial verbs “to subdue” and “to have dominion” are found: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue* it: and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Hebrew words used here are *kābaš* “to treat down”, “to disregard”, “to subjugate”, “to violate”; and *rādāh* “to have dominion”, “to prevail against”, “to rule”, etc. Usually these words in the Old Testament are used to describe rough power and authority when speaking about enslaving of pagan nations etc. The attitude towards nature is described by use of militant terms. For many scholars, the term “dominion over all the earth” sums up the Western religious roots of a destructive, anti-ecological, world-view that, as White Lynn (*see* ref. no. 10) charged, “insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”

In the third chapter of the Bible, which contains the curse (Gen. 3: 14-19) that accompanies the expulsion from the Garden, this thesis is developed: after the Fall the land may be hostile and humans will struggle to obtain food. Women and animals are *separated and set against each other*, and the very physical nature of women presented in the birthing/creation of life will include *punishment and pain*.

### Stewardship

In response to such charges, many scholars and religious ecologists point out that dominion is more accurately interpreted as *stewardship*, or the caring and keeping of the earth, because it is the Lord’s<sup>16</sup>. They see the text in *covenantal terms*: humans are to till and keep the land responsibly in return for God’s blessing enabling them to be fruitful and multiply. Ecotheologists make reference to the text from Gen. 2:15 describing the role of humans in the natural environment (Garden of Eden): The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden *to till and keep it*”. Hebrew verbs *ābad* means “to serve”, “to labour”, “to dress”; and *šāmar* “to hedge about”, “to keep”, “to preserve”. These two words contain God’s commandment in regards to proper attitude to natural environment before the fall of man<sup>17</sup>.

In this same vein, many point out that this stewardship theme runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and is explicit in the numerous commandments regarding agricultural and dietary laws in the care both for the land and for animals<sup>18</sup>. Ecologically oriented scholars go on to find much merit in the “land ethic” of the Hebrew Scriptures and the idea of a Sabbath for all, animals and the land included.

### Weather changes and God

Description of weather situation and weather changes in the Bible has attracted theologians for centuries.<sup>19</sup> In vast literature one can find enough texts to make satisfactory information about main trends of research.

The Bible itself was written, let us say, some 3 000 years ago (at least parts of the Old Testament), yet much of the Bible goes back 3 500 years ago and it describes conditions far earlier than that. The weather has been fundamental in the understanding of the Scripture and how God deals with mankind.

First of all it seems obvious that between weather situation and human activity there is “direct link”, e.g., prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah speak about the sin as a cause to turn the world against its natural development of creation (*see* Jer. 18; Is. 25). Isaiah speaks about the world as a parchment scroll which will cease because of natural cataclysms and before second coming of Christ (*see* Is. 34: 4; 49f).

#### ***a. Darkness and Gloom***

When Pharaoh refused to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, God instructed Moses to “stretch out his hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land – a darkness that could be felt” (Ex. 10:21). This resulted in “thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days”.

Again, when Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon he challenged Israel to turn from their wicked ways, but he also spoke to the surrounding nations like Assyria and Egypt. He warned Egypt of God’s coming judgement, when clouds and darkness would be used as a way of arresting their attention. We read that “It will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nation [...] all the shining lights in heaven I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land” (Ezek. 30:3; 32:8).

#### ***b. Drought***

As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, God gave them the Ten Commandments, together with many laws. He warned Israel to obey them and if they did not then one of the consequences would be drought; “the sky would be like bronze and the earth like iron” (Deut. 28: 23-24).

#### ***c. Violent Storms, Floods and Hail***

When the kings of the Amorites attacked friends of Israel, Joshua’s army went up to defend them. It is recorded that God helped Israel by throwing large hailstones at the enemy: “[...] more died from the hailstones than those killed by the sons of Israel [...]” (Josh. 10:11).

Later, the prophet Ezekiel challenged the false prophets of Israel, saying that God would judge them. The Lord spoke to these false prophets through Ezekiel, saying:

“I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath [...] flooding rain and hailstones [...]” (Ezek. 13:13).

When Jonah tried to ignore God’s instructions by taking a boat trip, God sent “a great wind and storm” (Jon. 1:4) that threatened to destroy the ship. Then, in New Testament times, God reversed the situation and calmed the wind and sea in order to save the disciples:

“Jesus rebuked the wind and sea [...] and the wind died down and it became perfectly calm” (Mk. 4:39).

From these few examples we are convinced that, in the past, God has used abrupt weather changes (not long-term climate changes) to arrest man’s attention. What about future?



***d. Weather changes before the Second Coming of Christ***

The Bible makes it quite clear that there will be a definite end to life as we know it. Earth's governmental systems, economic and trading systems, animal kingdom, and even geology will all be changed at the Second coming of Christ. Our current age is coming to a dramatic end as God deals with rebellious nations. During a brief period at the end of this age God will exact a series of judgements on the nations, and this includes changes to earth's weather! These are more likely to be severe „weather events” rather than long-term “climate changes” simply because of the relatively short prophetic timescale involved.

The book of Isaiah, ch. 24:27, sometimes called “Isaiah’s Apocalypse”, describe God’s judgement upon the entire world for its sin. They also correlate well with judgements on the earth described in Revelation.

One of the judgements predicted by Isaiah appears to be drought: “The earth will be completely laid waste [...] the earth mourns and withers, the world fades and withers [...]” (Is. 24: 3-4).

Drought is one of the consequences of disobedience (Deut. 28: 23-24; Zech. 14:17). Another form of judgement prophesied by Isaiah appears to be *extreme* heat – heat severe enough to kill people: “Therefore [...] the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left” (Is. 24:6).

The book of Revelation speaks of the same end time events and predicts extreme weather as part of God’s judgement upon the nations. There will be fierce, scorching heat: “The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was given to it to scorch men with fire. Men were scorched with fierce heat [...]” (Rev. 16: 8-9).

When questioned about the end of the age, Jesus hints at wild weather: “There will be [...] dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Lk. 21:25). The root meaning of the Greek in this verse can mean nothing else but literal sea and literal waves. The word “roaring” comes from the Greek *echeo* meaning “to make a loud noise”. Hurricanes and coastal flooding spring to mind.

Then there’s the future Gog-Magog War. At some point in the future, Iran, together with other nations, will invade Israel from the north (Ezek. 38). Just as God intervened to release Israel from the grips of Pharaoh, so He will intervene to protect Israel from the invading armies. As with Joshua (see above), the weather plays an important part in their defeat, with torrential rain and hail (Ezek. 38:22).

Hail features high on the weather ingredients list at the end of the age. It is part of God’s judgement upon the nations. Besides fierce heat there will be extreme hail and snow storms (Job 38: 22-23; Rev. 16: 8-9, 21): “Or have you entered the storehouses of the snow [...] which I have reserved for the time of distress [...]” (Job 38: 22-23). “[...] and huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men [...]” (Rev. 16:21).

Clearly, God intends to use short-term weather changes to influence world affairs in the future. Since there is clear Biblical support for God’s control of past and future weather, it is logical to ask, “Is God speaking through climate change or severe weather events in today’s world?” How close are we to these future events?

Consequently the biblical evidence considers climate changes as part of God’s end-time scenario – it is God who is controlling the climate. From the Bible we can say with certainty that:

1. God has used the weather to influence nations and individuals in the past;
2. Bible prophecy says that God will use severe weather events to 'speak' to the nations at the end of this age;
3. Prophetic signs and the state of the world suggest the end of this age is imminent.

If we are indeed close to the end of this age, then dramatic weather events seem imminent. God will soon use severe weather events to speak to, and judge, the nations. Clearly, it is a very effective tool to arrest the world's attention.

### **Meaning Assigned to Natural Phenomena: Rainbow Case**

Whereas plants and animals have to adapt to changing environmental conditions, people on the opposite are active rather than passive in what they do, and their activities are rooted in conceptualization. In regards to fundamental orientation of human activities we know that it is apostatic: it turns away from both God the Creator and from creation people originally belong to.

Thus triangle of mutual relationships is created: God the Creator – nature or “created world” – people. After the Fall it is not a triangle of “positive cooperation” any more, rather it is triangle of separation. Obviously where there are relationships of mistrust, unresponsiveness and enmity, there is a place of authoritarianism on the one hand and subjugation on the other.

Examples given above demonstrate that God of the Bible can use “nature” against humans. From that moment on phenomena of nature (i.e., weather changes) – become symbols of God's presence, punishment or blessing. God speaks through those phenomena and one should have “eyes” to read the message behind them. Important function of biblical prophets among others is to read those phenomena, to explain them to people. Also Christ reminded people to “read signs of time”: although the reminder teaches to „understand” times they belong to, the context is clear – particular signs are given for people to understand closeness of the Second coming of Christ. People know how to predict weather conditions but are reluctant to read the book of nature as a symbol of God's attitude socially, politically and spiritually.

There is a symbol in the book of Genesis which shows the “nature” and “times” melted together. It is a well-known story about Noah's flood and subsequent Covenant between God and all living beings on Earth after the flood (Gen., ch. 6-9). The visible sign of the covenant – rainbow – has been put above the Earth after the previous age, highly unpleasant for living due to apostasy was over.

Trying to reconstruct the sequence of events after the fall and Noah's flood the following picture has been suggested: “The earth itself seems to have been surrounded before the creation of Adam by some kind of an opaque cloud over cover that once in a while would break open and the sun shine down. Yet there was an extensive amount of water vapor in the atmosphere, much more than we have today. Clearly this is the case because this condition lasted for around 1 650 years until the flood of Noah, according to the Hebrew chronology of the Bible.

Then all of a sudden the waters from the great deep began to come up, but it also says the waters from the sky began to come down in sheets, in rain that lasted for 40 days and nights. This must mean that in those 1 650 years before the flood, great quantities of water were suspended in the atmosphere. This may have caused the earth to have a kind of greenhouse effect.

The history of the earth before the flood shows that even though men may have lived 900 some odd years, they were in trouble during those times. The earth did not yield its seed at the proper times. There was no regularity of winter and summer. In some cases even day and night had irregular periods.

What is shown is that the earth itself was under a curse that lasted until the time of Noah (according to Gen. 3:17).”

Of course, the particular sequence of natural circumstances can be discussed as they are hypothetical. The rainbow was given on the threshold of the new era, that of the covenant. The threshold separates the cursed world and future regime of relationships between God and humans. God promises regularity: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22).” The visible sign (rainbow) becomes a symbol of the one-sided determination of God to secure regular and predictable natural prognosis which are better than those before the covenant. Thus the visible sign becomes a symbol for the message that God promises to secure further existence of people. And the promise will stay there until the end of times – whenever people see rainbow, they remember God’s promise in awe and reverence.

In similar manner the line was drawn between the fallen man and entrance to Eden when cherubim with flaming swords closed gates to the former condition. Adam and Eve were driven out from Eden “which turned every way, to guard the way to the Tree of Life” (Gen. 3:24). One can imagine the closed entrance as flaming sunset by the far-away horizon – the Sun disc in the color of blood seemingly seals the world rejected by man’s own foolishness.

Signs of the climate (or weather) condition have clearly stated function: they mark the border between two different regimes in relationships between God and humans. This function is supplemented with another one, namely, to serve as reminder in future. Although these two worlds – that of humans and that of God – are separated from each other, majestic natural phenomena still remind us about their essential connectivity. Ominous, threatening flames of sunset which remind about the committed sin and apostasy – and gorgeous beauty of the rainbow which reminds us of the sovereign and immeasurable mercy of God – are well recorded in human consciousness.

### **Discussion about Human Capacity to Change the God’s Promise**

The story about Noah’s flood and the sign of the first covenant belong to the so-called prehistoric cycle of the Old Testament (before Patriarchs), i.e., the event doesn’t have precise dating (although several suggestions have been made in literature). The text sketches fundamental issues in relationships between God and humans before the call of Abraham. Fundamental issues contain sustainable, long-lasting laws which have not been abolished by God: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22).

In other words, the natural cycle of things was promised to continue, and nothing special was meant to happen to the climate whilst man is around. Of course, man may well be upsetting what God had planned. But man is not able to cancel what God has promised to keep.

There should be no surprise that some ultra conservative Christians discuss the climate change and global warming issue as a “conspiracy” because men are not

authorized to change the God's law. US Senator James Inhofe supports that view, and he argues that vast sums of money assigned to climate change issues are spent in vain.<sup>20</sup>

## Use of Symbols

So there are certain natural phenomena to which we have ascribed particular meanings. These phenomena are well known to every student of myths and religions, and they symbolize the presence of God in human life. Biblical symbols are well known to Christian civilization; some of those symbols are widespread and are not linked to some narrow cultural tradition, although their meanings sometimes may differ in particular cultures (rainbow, rain, fire, etc.). For ages these symbols have been looked upon as stable as the whole world we live in, and this is where the term "tradition" comes from. We can even say that stability of symbolic meanings is one of those three whales on whom the world rests.

When speaking about rainbow as a "sign" from God which confirms that from now on humans will have better, i.e., predictable weather conditions, Hebrew Bible uses the word *ot*, meaning "outward expression of will or conviction", "outwardly visible proof", "signal". Sometimes the word is translated as "sign", "wonder", or "flag". The Septuagint uses *sēmeiōn* "proof", "expression", etc. Both Hebrew and Greek words point to a close connection between the inner content and outward expression (with a single remark: the inner content always stays incomprehensible for humans, it is self-contained and mysterious since mind of God is above and beyond human capacity to grasp it). However, this inner content is somehow made known by visible signs. The rainbow is given for people to see and to contemplate God's mercy, even more than that – the text emphasizes that the rainbow will serve as reminder to God Himself about His promise (Gen. 9:16). Symbolic meaning of the sign is made active by reception and knowing it.

This observation is very important for the current project. We are interested in:

1. what meaning has been assigned to the sign which makes it a symbol,
2. when and why these previously assigned meanings may change. "Iconography is important [...] when one considers entities which in themselves remain unchanged, such as the sun, moon, storms, earth, and trees. We assume far too easily that these phenomena held the same meaning for the Ancient Near East as they do for us."<sup>21</sup>

It seems obvious when speaking about symbolic meanings ascribed to the sun, moon and the stars – rather stable heavenly bodies, but further questions arise once we start talking about fast changing issues like weather. It seems clear that nothing is "the same" as it used to be from creation when "God saw it was good". One may wonder – will heavenly bodies stay forever? And what about natural phenomena – wind, storm, fauna and flora at some particular spot on earth? They change, as climate does. Why do they change, and what does the wind bring to us?... We can't help but see changing characteristics of those phenomena, and their meaning for humans is also changing along with them.

In the changed situation after the World War II the natural environment experienced the threat of human activity. Whereas ancient symbols reminded about the designed unity and cooperation of God the Creator, nature and humans, interpretation and use of symbols started to change as well. Traditional meanings of symbols have

been questioned and they were more and more assigned to social and environmental activism. New meanings have been attributed with social goal: will the world stay where it has been since creation? Look, acid rain doesn't show signs of God's mercy and blessing, rather it kills and poisons and one should run away from it!

While the rise and development of ecotheology is a global challenge, the artists' response to the ecology threat became more local and it varies from country to country. The artist's approach and style of expression becomes more bitter and sharp in countries with a heavy industrial and ecological threat set against the beauty of nature (e.g., in Norway). In countries, such as Latvia, with a lesser industrial and ecological threat, the artists' conception is more romantic and inwardly focused. Perhaps there is more space for "Eastern Orthodox" (i.e., inwardly meditative) approach to symbols.

The point has been made clear: climate change causes distortions in human perception. Within the frame of the current NORDPLUS project we focus on how traditional symbols – or, to put it more precisely, how the well-known natural phenomena with traditionally assigned meanings are changing their functions in minds of people today? Obviously since Climate change is an issue relatively recent and aggressive we are facing new ways in which traditionally accepted symbols of mediation between nature and humans are used.

The above mentioned thesis is illustrated by examples from modern ecologically minded art. *The sign which has been established as traditionally accepted symbol is used to mean the right opposite concept.* Examples are abundant; also current project shows that tendency. Perhaps it can happen by accident when traditional meaning is lost or unknown to the artist (seldom), or because artist wanted to provoke the reader, viewer, user of the artwork by invocation of more acute reaction (often). It is well-known that the use of traditional symbols in some unexpected context is one of those popular methods in post-modern art; in ecologically minded art such provocation may serve a clearly stated purpose to attract attention rather than simply to destroy traditional meaning. For example, painting by a student of Latvian Christian Academy shows Noah and his animals watching how his ark is entered by... cars, electronic devices, etc.! Noah and his flock is standing nearby humiliated, and finds no place on the boat.

Another example shows vastness of the sea at sunset ("Sunset" by L. Dinere). Above the dangerous water there is a sail-boat, perhaps Noah's ark. However, the viewer's attention is focused on a flying fish, desperately jumping out from the deep in order to find refuge in the... boat! The message is clear in both paintings: natural environment is substituted by artificial one. Natural environment becomes hostile for animals to live in and they seek abnormal ways to escape – like seals and whales, sometimes found taking flight on the seashore sands rather than in water.

Going further, sometimes objects with well-established symbolical meaning in traditional iconography are used to describe very personal feelings and ideas. In this case modern art risks becoming unintelligible for general viewer without special education (or, rather, unktion). Interpretation of symbols is characterized by dialogical form: the meaning of a symbol exists solely inside communication of people without which there is only an empty form. This dialogue which makes interpretation of the symbol possible can break apart if the viewer or interpreter stands in an estranged position. However, if the goal of the artist is to provoke, this estrangement from tradition is done by purpose. The goal of the artist is to create shock, to urge the change of a mindset. The purpose is clear in this case: what has been thought of as stable

and unchanged for centuries, is endangered by human activity in the industrial era. However, if objects with well-established symbolical meaning in traditional iconography are used to describe very personal feelings and ideas, the word “estranged” perhaps should be replaced with “position inadequate to artist’s concept”. This tendency shows how the world inevitably breaks apart and loses its inherent unity and wholeness when civilized world of humans is estranged from natural environment.

Finally, there are cases when popular animals, birds, plants are used in the nation branding. Elevated in this capacity they (1) represent national fauna and flora and (2) secure special protection to them.

Here is the list of national symbols, country by country (participating in the current project, from North to South). Even brief introduction to them makes clear that they are chosen because of two key features: being widespread (and therefore well-known) and because they must be protected. Along with those two key features national symbols may have strong political engagement (e.g., Estonian blue cornflower, Lithuanian wolf, etc.). This use of otherwise “neutral” symbols shows another key feature, namely, they are possibly strongest visible pictures of connection between the nation and its land. The country is represented not by arts and crafts, but its nature.

**Norway:** *the elk (moose), purple heather being and dipper. They give an emphasis to the unique characteristic attached to being an independent nation.*

**Finland:** *the bear, swan, perch, birch, lily-of-the-valley and granite. These symbols have powerful connotations for Finns from ancient times. In olden days, people didn’t dare say the name of the bear, the king of the Finnish forest, so they called him names like Otso, Kontio, and Honey-Paw. The swan has strong symbolic value, signifying grace and purity. Birch and lily-of-the-valley are used as decorations on festive occasions such as midsummer. Granite is traditionally used in Finland for construction and sculpture.*

**Estonia:** *blue cornflower and the barn swallow, the Baltic herring and the gray limestone. The cornflower grows commonly in rye fields, creating a strong connection in the minds of Estonians between the flower and their daily bread. The blossoms of the cornflower have a particularly striking graphic appearance which has led to its use by artists for decorative purposes. It was chosen as the national flower in 1968 also for another important reason. People knew that the blue of the then forbidden Estonian flag was defined as “cornflower blue”. The Soviet authorities, in a move that is nowadays quite difficult to believe, responded by banning representations of the cornflower. The barn swallow is a characteristic guest of Estonian homes. Its call can be heard from practically every eave or barn rafter in the country. If the bird finds a suitable opening, under the ridge of a roof or a broken window, it will build its cup-shaped nest; it will even build it inside a house. Estonian national stone is the country’s valuable grey limestone. Most castles, churches, farm buildings, and countless stone fences are made of limestone.*

**Latvia:** *the white wagtail, the two-spotted ladybird, daisy, the oak and linden, and amber. White wagtail, a tireless, highly energetic bird is frequently mentioned as a symbol of hard work and industriousness. The ladybird’s Latvian name “mārīte” is derived from the name of the supreme Latvian goddess Māra, (“earth mother”) responsible for the fertility of the land. The two-spotted ladybird moves slowly and diligently, but is excellent at defending itself. The Latvian national flower daisy blossoms in June, just in time to be woven into festive wreaths for the Midsummer fes-*

tivities, and it continues to bloom until September, providing Latvian flower lovers, decorators and celebrants with their most popular accent for floral gifts and arrangements throughout the summer. The oak and linden are male and female figures in Latvian folklore; they are characteristic of the Latvian landscape and figure prominently in the practical and spiritual lives of ancient Latvians. Both trees have traditionally been used for medical purposes. Amber has always been an essential part of the Latvian cultural identity. In ancient times the amber found along Latvia's Baltic Sea coast was considered 'good as gold' and was sought by Vikings as well as traders as far away as Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire. This led to the development of the Amber Road between Latvia and the Black Sea. And finally, Latvians have their River of Destiny – The Daugava. In addition to its strategic role as a major transport artery since times immemorial, the Daugava was an essential means of livelihood for Latvia's inhabitants. In recent times it has become the site of Latvia's hydroelectric power stations and a major source of energy. The river's fateful role throughout Latvia's history has made it a treasured subject of song, poetry and stories.

**Lithuania:** White stork, common cuckoo, aurochs, elk, wolf, and bear. Lithuanians (along with Latvians) believe that storks bring harmony to the families on whose property they nest; they keep up the tradition of telling their children that storks bring babies. Stork Day is celebrated on March 25 with various archaic rituals: gifts for children, attributed to the storks, snakes are caught, killed and buried under the doorstep, and straw fires are lit. Notably, Lithuania is a beneficial and important habitat for these birds: it has the highest known nesting density in the world. Common cuckoo is said to sweep away the last traces of winter, and the month of May (*Gegužės mėnuo*) is named for this bird. According to a popular legend, an iron wolf in *Gediminas'* dream encouraged the Grand Duke to establish Vilnius and make the city his capital. Lithuanian national plant is rue: a bride traditionally wears a little crown made of rue, which is a symbol of maidenhood. Trees of special significance include oak, birch, linden, and spruce. A veneration of them comes from pagan times, when they were of religious significance, and the significance of trees is reflected in the Lithuanian calendar (June is, in Lithuanian, "birch" (*Birželio mėnuo*), and July is "linden" (*Liepos mėnuo*)).

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## Trīs vaļi, uz kuriem balstās pasaule: Dievs, radība un simboli

### *Kopsavilkums*

Rakstā iztirzāta virkne jautājumu, ar kuriem strādā šis NORDPLUS projekts – klimata simbolu interpretāciju uz vides izmaiņu fona. Sniegti fakti, kas ilustrē globālo sasilšanu cilvēka darbības ietekmē. Tiek dots īss ieskats ekoteoloģijas izveidē, atsaucoties uz rietumu kristietībai adresēto kritiku, kas ir daļēji atbildīga pie dabas degradācijas. Austrumu pareizticīgās kristietības antropoloģiskie resursi rakstā ieskicēti ar Krievijas Pareizticīgās Baznīcas Sociālās mācības tēzēm. Balstoties uz Genesis grāmatas tekstu lingvistisko analīzi, norādīta atšķirība starp dabas „pakļaušanu” un „rūpēm par to”. Mijiedarbība starp cilvēku un dabas vidi notiek ar simbolu starpniecību, un pārmaiņas dabiskajā vidē izraisa sekojošas nobīdes gan šo simbolu interpretācijā, gan lietošanā. Tradicionālie simboli tiek daudzveidīgi lietoti reliģijā, mākslā un ikdienas komunikācijā. Rakstā analizēti ar vides aizsardzību saistīti mākslas darbi.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** ekoteoloģija, globālā sasilšana, cilvēka iedarbība, Bībeles interpretācija, pakļaušana, rūpes, simboli (to lietojums)



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