



Dossiers D&J n°3 - Summary Homo Ecologicus

Diversity in our life stories: an advantage for our participation in the ecological transition?

Full dossier

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Problems related to ecology raise questions with an increasing number of people. Here the stakes are shared world-wide. Within each of our countries, our leaders must take action in critical areas (to limit global warming, to protect the environment, ...). But it is also reasonable to think about the paths that our own lives have taken. How can their diversity help us to commit ourselves to participation in the ecological transition?



This issue of Dossiers D&J tries to clarify, via interviews of David & Jonathan members and others, in what way ecological questions are shaping our lives. The women and men who testify here are mostly LGBT's (lesbians, gays, bi or transsexuals), some living in the city and some in the country, in France and abroad, having a Christian faith or not, and coming from different generations.

In reading these testimonies, it becomes clear that not only is ecology influencing our ways of consuming, of eating, of looking after our health, it also changes our way of participating in society, our relationships with other countries, our sharing of wealth, not to mention the way we perceive nature, the passing of time, and our spiritualities.

When faced with ecological risks, one temptation would be to take refuge in reactionary fundamentalisms. On the opposite side, the ecological transition can take root in our individual or collective experiences, and these enrich social and political dialogue, as well as our spirituality in the broadest sense. A wide variety in life histories seems to us to be a source of hope about our capacity for evolving and adapting.

Elisabeth Saint Guily and Nicolas Neiertz
Co-presidents and spokespersons for David & Jonathan

Summary

David & Jonathan sees itself as an association that pays attention to the “signs of the times”, and tries to decipher in world events reasons for hope and a call to commitment.

Ecology covers a range of problems – environmental, scientific, political and social – that have both local and international impact: global warming, sharing of water supplies and other resources, agriculture... Of course, national governments and their leaders have the responsibility to set up wise policies, but each of us is also concerned individually: in our health, our choice of food, our lifestyle and our way of living together.

Confronted with such a vast subject, the aim of our dossier is to try to understand, via interviews with D&J members and other people, in what way ecology concerns us, how it changes the course of our lives, affects our spirituality. The women and men who give testimony here are mostly LGBT people (lesbians, gays, bi- or transsexual), living in cities or in the country, in France or abroad, with or without a Christian faith and coming from different generations.

➔ From new awareness to changing lifestyle

When we become aware of what is at stake in ecology, it is often the result of a long reflection. For example, Odile and Annie bought a house in the country in Ardèche which turned out to be a chance for rich local experiences and a catalyst for their personal development. *“It’s both a home for us and a place for sharing experiences, over a period of our lives that might be limited”.*

Reading books on political ecology made Emeline become aware of the fact that she *“had come to the end of something [...] I really needed to change and this book triggered off a new departure. As political ecologists insist, any change must come from within, it can’t be imposed from outside. It also takes time, if it’s going to last”.* At the same time, Aglaé realises that she is *“not capable of providing for*



her basic needs, whereas my grand-parents knew how to do that”. The necessity of *“creating unity”* between what we are and how we live is a great concern for François M, as for many of the people interviewed.

Some completely transform their lives. For instance, Isabelle and Chantal, originally city-dwellers, went to live in the country: *“We spend our time cooking, gathering, harvesting and transforming our harvest, or else in gardening”.* Ecology has become for them a *“daily practice that concerns all the fields of our lives: work, health, food, transport or shopping [...], our relationships and the attention to others, our experience of time...”.*

In the same way, François G has called into question his education as an engineer: he has become a researcher in ecology. For him, ecology requires a search for coherence: *“I don’t make a great distinction between my relationship with nature and my relationships with people: in both cases it’s a question of forming a relationship with what isn’t oneself. Human beings are not the same as animals or plants, but in terms of respect for the other, I think there is a lot in common”.*

Even so, he has a critical view of environmental research and he considers that in light of vested interests and pressure groups, *“the ability for a scientist to act as whistle-blower remains fairly weak [...] I seem to have more power as a consumer or as a common citizen than as a scientist”.* Aglaé is in agreement with this idea and points out that our choice of the products that we consume *“is a form of militancy”.*

The real influence of political leaders leaves Odile sceptical: *“ecology is a vital concern for the planet: we are heading straight into a wall!”*

For her, *“international conferences on climate change make no progress or very little”.* Annie considers that we must take up a different form of politics, but she is unsure as to the form it might take. For her, *“it still seems too early to get organised and*

reinvent a system for living differently. But it’s not too early to start thinking together about a different form of organisation”.

Like François G, Isabelle and Chantal consider that *“we transmit our convictions essentially by example: by simply showing our visitors [...] that a simpler, more sober, but still immensely happy life is possible”.*

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➔ Ecology and agriculture: what's the day-to-day reality?

Several people living in a rural environment observe that agricultural practices are evolving and are becoming more respectful of the environment. As Elisa sees it, it's an evolution towards *"agriculture aimed at high performance not only in economic terms, but also in environmental and social aspects"*.

Noël, as a retired farmer, observes that this evolution towards new practices, or even towards organic farming, has in the past met with strong opposition: *"My ideas upset people. I think it was because I said that we didn't all have the same interests in view"*. His experience has motivated other farmers to evolve. Elisa points out



that *"to get out of conventional agriculture and go over to organic, you have to take a risk [...] and a fundamental commitment over several years and*

not everyone is ready for that. Profitability is only achieved in the long term".

Relations between farmers and ecology militants are often difficult. Michel, who is a wine grower in the Bordeaux region, talks about *"the real difficulty for the farming community to get along with neo-rurals who put up fences and don't always understand the farming world. [...] Many prejudices appear. In a way, we feel accused of being determined to pollute the environment"*. These difficulties have a political impact. Elisa considers that the *"turning point at present in the farming world is the rise in votes for the National Front. [...] These people suffer and feel completely abandoned"*.

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For Alexandre, who raises sheep, the ecological attitude can take you a long way. In Senegal, he *"progressively deconstructed his vision of development"*. He then adopted a form of sheep breeding limited to his own needs. *"My aim was to reach a farming method that was as autonomous as possible, or at least the most in agreement with principles such as not producing waste or consuming as little energy as possible, to make as little use as possible of*

industrial goods, synthetic pharmaceuticals, chemicals, fertilizers, feed additives, etc. In fact the counterpart of that is that it requires more observation. You really have to be present with your livestock, be really observant so as to avoid a certain number of diseases or accidents".

➔ What can each of us do practically?

There are a number of personal and local initiatives that can be taken so as to put into practice these ideas on a day-to-day basis. Pascal for many years ate commercial food and found that it made him sick. After many months of treatment he had a



specialist told him: *"I can't do anything more for you unless you change your diet"*. After a drastic change in his diet, now 90% based on fresh fruit and vegetables, he has been able to get back to health. Philippe takes part in a Local Exchange system in Clermont-Ferrand whose aim is to allow members to exchange goods and services locally. Alexandra and Claire-Marine are in similar system in Paris: it's a club that *"creates links between neighbours so they can meet, create local contacts and exchange services"*. Other systems such as Community-Supported Agriculture allow you to buy food products from local producers. For example, Sébastien is a member of *La ruche qui dit oui* which makes produce available by favouring short transport. These exchange systems can go as far as replacing national currency. Hervé has experience with a local currency which is a *"means for exchanging goods or services"* locally and without any possibility for speculation.

➔ Ecology in other places

Ecological crises are often much more dramatic in poorer countries. In India, Yogesh interviewed by Andry, says that *"in former times, Indians followed Hindu precepts and prayed for nature (the trees, the*



flowers, the mountains, the rivers, the sea...). Then with colonization, “slowly respect for nature disappeared”. Indian society is highly inegalitarian, with only a small middle class. The population is now becoming aware of the effects on health of pollution in the cities. However “each time that someone fights for the environment, they end up losing through lack of help and because of the risk of being killed by the mafia or by politicians”.

Magali told us about an Indian philosopher and biodiversity militant, Vandana Shiva. She shows that certain conflicts seen as religious or ethnic, are in fact related to the control of the water supply, as in the conflicts between different regions in India (e.g. Punjab), or the conflicts between Turkey, Syria and Iraq related to the control of the waters of the Tigris or the Euphrates...

Fabrice quotes the words of the philosopher Mohamed Taleb: “What distinguishes the ecology of the South compared with the ecology of the North is the social and community dimension of ecology in the South: it’s a question of survival, with peasant movements, and the problem of expropriation [...]”.

Whereas in the North, for example in France, ecology is often the prerogative of wealthy social classes who can allow themselves of a touch of generosity without changing their lifestyle”.

➔ Ecology and the question of human diversity

Many of the LGBT persons questioned are specially sensitive to ecology. Babeth sums it up this way: “for me as a Lesbian Christian conservationist, what is at stake to-day is the reduction of our ecological imprint on the small scale that I am capable of, while at the same time improving relations between people, through respect and dialogue. I want to be engaged in fighting exclusion while at the same time looking after protecting creation. So being a conservationist and a Christian might be just a matter of paying attention both to



humans and to the entire planet”.

Stéphane adds: “For me ecology means promoting diversity, firstly in nature of course, but also in society: diversity as a form of social enrichment. This relates to how human society has to be built”.

➔ Ecology and spirituality

For Marie-Anne, “Christianity is an invitation to love. But it’s not just a matter of feelings. There is also something like ‘taking care’, being aware, making life better for all. If I allow destruction, pollution of

our earth, our home, our dwelling place, our vital resources – water, air, food – I’m going against this call to love, to ‘take care’ of what is there so that humanity can live”. Hélène adds: “The link with Christianity is recalled in the Eucharistic Prayer: bread and wine, which earth has given and human hands have made. There’s something important there that we tend to forget”.

On the other hand, Odile points out that “Christian churches have missed their chance with ecology”.



Stéphane, as a pastor, confirms: “It is true that spiritual ecology has been left aside to a great extent, in France as elsewhere. Christianity bears a share in the responsibility for the ecological crisis. A particular reading of Genesis pushed us towards dominating other living beings, and

considering the earth as a resource to be exploited”. However Stéphane reminds us that people such as the physician and theologian Albert Schweitzer developed “a form of Christian morality that was not only to be learned but also be lived out deeply through the concept of ‘respect for life’”. In the same way, Anthony mentions that the Orthodox writer and theologian Michel-Maxime Egger invites us to “invent the shape of a Christian eco-spirituality”.

Stéphane remains hopeful and observes: “The pope is preparing a new encyclical about ecology: many of us non-Catholics expect a lot from it”.

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Other people have a completely different approach to their spirituality. For example, Alexandre, the sheep farmer, talks about how observing his flock of sheep has changed his outlook on the world: “When I say observation, that means being present to the world, being in the here-and-now...”. He notices how hard it is to stop his flow of thought: “It’s so hard to stop thinking and just be there”.

Oriental spiritualities can provide keys for understanding ecological transformation. So for François G, “ecological theories up till the 1970’s were based on the principle of a stable equilibrium”. On the other hand, other approaches, such as the Taoist view, seem better adapted to expressing ecological changes: “Life is always in movement, in a perpetual state of change. The only thing that lasts

in the universe is the fact that everything changes". Nicolas talks about the different ways of perceiving time: "In these spiritualities, what strikes me is the absence of linearity of time: time can be cyclical, or suspended in an infinitely dense present. It doesn't lead towards a finality established by a creating principle. So nature there is not domesticated to be put to use in view of this finality, but it imposes its creative-destructive force on the human being. The spiritual ideal is to abandon oneself to it, or even to dissolve in it, by a series of 'silent transformations'".



➔ The risk of sectarianism

Babeth, even though she's very sensitive to environmental questions, sees a risk of sectarianism in some forms of ecology. In the Netherlands, she was shocked by "deep green" ecologists. *"For some, it had become impossible to share a meal with someone who ate meat or who didn't eat products from organic farming [...]. What upset me particularly was the judgement and the ostracism on the part of some ecologists. That reminded me of the question of 'pure' and 'impure' which remains so strong in some human societies".*



In the same way, Nicolas, quoting an article by Anthony, points out that the idea of eco-spirituality *"should not limit the freedom, and so the responsibility, of the human being, for example with reactionary aims in view, such as in the ideology of 'human ecology' found in traditionalist circles who are opposed to certain human rights such as chemical contraception, abortion, medically assisted conception, or the rights of sexual minorities. It should on the contrary be part of an open-minded Christianity, open to the contemporary world".* For Anthony, the aim of "human ecology" is to popularise *"a vision which under the appearances of being libertarian and alternative, conveys the most obscurantist traditionalism".*

➔ Conclusion: in these life projects, what can inspire us in our approach to the ecological transition?

The ecological transition deeply disturbs a number of people, for not only does it influence our ways of consuming, eating and treating our

illnesses, but it also changes our way of building a society, our relationship with other countries, our perception of nature, of time, as well as our spiritualities.

When confronted with ecological risks, one may be tempted to take refuge in reactionary fundamentalisms.

The testimonies collected in this dossier show different ways of

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reacting to ecology, through different ways of directing one's life. So dealing with the ecological crisis, change can arise out of individual and collective experiences that enrich social and political dialogue and can be source of hope concerning our capacity to evolve and adapt ourselves.

Fabrice, François G., Babeth, Nicolas, François M., Magali, Andry, Anthony – translation by Michael ■

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