

Ecodominical Attempts to Ideologically Transform the World into a Protective Realm for All Human Beings through Using the Concept of Goodness in Dealing with the Reality of Religion

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Abstract: This paper investigates the possibility of identifying various ecodominical or constructive possibilities which have the potential to ideologically transform the world at a global scale in the sense that they can promote a set of ideas with positive connotations in dealing with the extremely complex issue of religion. Whether religion is good or bad, positive or negative has nothing to do with this article's basic methodology which seeks to isolate various theoretical attempts aimed at approaching the issue of religion through a common denominator. For this paper, this common denominator is the human being and, by association, the notion of goodness which will be used in order to demonstrate that, concerning religion, it can provide not only a theoretical framework for positive discussions about religion but also an ecodominical possibility whereby humanity can transform the world into a safer environment for persons of all races and convictions. Four such ecodominical attempts to use the notion of goodness will be analyzed in connection with the reality of religion: John Shelby Spong who promotes goodness in order to free society of religion so for him religion is useless, Ion Bria for whom goodness cannot be detached from religion so religion is vital, Vito Macuso whose conviction is that goodness exists with or without religion so religion is neutral, and Desmond Tutu who believes that goodness can turn religion, any religion for that matter, in a positive reality, so in his understanding religion is positive.

Keywords: Goodness, Ecodominity, Religion, Society, Humanity, Christianity

INTRODUCTION. TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It takes nothing but common sense to realize that there is something wrong with the world. While opinions about what exactly is wrong with it and the extent of the problem range from numerous to uncountable, there is a sense that the wrong in the world has something to do with religion. Mladen Turk, for instance, shows that in its capacity as "beliefs,

rituals, narratives, and codes of conduct”, religion is capable of assisting the human being in determining ”what is good and what is evil” (Turk, 2003: 332).

Consequently, establishing whether or not religion itself is indeed evil appears to be not only a different discussion but also a concern which lies beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, suffice to say that the connection between religion and evil demonstrates that between these two realities – and the corresponding concepts – there is not only a powerful connection but also a common denominator identified by André Lascaris as the human being (Lascaris, 2008: 195). If this logic is at least partially correct, then it is most likely safe to conclude that the human being is the actual problem in the equation, and if there is anything wrong with religion then it is most likely wise to search for the problem not as much in religion *per se* but rather in the human being.

This paper, however, is not about whether the human being is evil or not – although it is sufficiently evident that the human being is indeed evil and it is so almost beyond hope – but rather about there is anything which can be done about it. Despite the evil which can be found within the human being, the opposite manifestation of goodness is also a human reality which surfaces in close connection to religion. Such a conclusion does not need any scientific proof; on the contrary, as John Cottingham put is, what one needs in order to establish a connection between goodness and religion is nothing but ”ordinary human observation of the natural world” (Cottingham, 2011: 56).

This is why this paper is about putting goodness and religion together in a way which provides human being with a shelter in this world. In other words, is it reasonable to even discuss about the juxtaposition of goodness and religion in order to find a way to make the world a bit safer for the human beings who inhabit it? Or can the world be safe enough for the human beings despite the reality of evil? This paper is not going to search for absolute or definite answers regarding whether the world can be a better place for all human beings; what it does attempt, however, is to investigate whether the connection between goodness and religion can be used to argue in favor of seeing this world as shelter for the human beings living in it. Can this world realistically be – in Richard A. Cohen’s exceptionally beautiful rendering – ”the discreet gentle alterity of habitation” for most, if not even perhaps for all human beings? (Cohen, 1994: 198).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to see if – by using the concept of goodness – it is possible to deal with religion in a positive way so that the world should be transformed in a better and safer environment for human beings. In order to pursue this line of inquiry, I am going to use two ideas borrowed from Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz and Ernst M. Conradie. While the former provided me with the notion of ecodomy, the latter assisted me in applying it to the reality of the world. In more concrete terms, Müller-Fahrenholz wrote a seminal work in 1995 entitled *God's Spirit. Transforming a World in Crisis*, in which he developed the concept of ecodomy, a Greek term pointing to the actual 'building of a house' (Müller-Fahrenholz, 1995: 109).

Strategically used in the New Testament by the apostle Paul to refer to the spirit of the early Christian communities (Romans 14: 19), the service of these groups by means of particular 'gifts and talents' (Ephesians 2: 21) or the development of the church itself as body of Christ (2 Corinthians 13: 10), the notion of ecodomy (*oikodomē*) is expanded by Müller-Fahrenholz to 'any constructive process' which happens in the world. Furthermore, in Müller-Fahrenholz, ecodomy does not refer exclusively to the church as body of Christ but rather to the whole world as 'body' of humanity. Thus, ecodomy points to how human beings should related to the world or how they should treat the world – in Müller-Fahrenholz's words, 'ecodomy is the art of inhabiting instead of dominating the earth' (Müller-Fahrenholz, 1995: 109).

Conradie takes over Müller-Fahrenholz's notion of ecodomy and uses it in order to demonstrate that the concept carries with it the 'anthropology of stewardship' or how the world – in its capacity as (God's) creation – should be seen not only as house but also as home of all human beings (Conradie, 2006: 16). Moreover, Conradie show how this transformation of the world from house into home can be performed by focusing on the idea of goodness as essence of creation or substance of the world. Quite obviously, Conradie works with ecodomy and goodness as he understands them within the boundaries of the Christian religion because both *oikodomē*, perceived as foundation for the church, and *plērōma*, seen as synonymous to goodness, are meant to consolidate the church and, through the church, the entire world (Conradie, 2006: 143).

Leaving aside the fact that this proposition can be explored in endless variations, this paper will methodologically focus only on four ecodomi-cal attempts to transform the world into a safer place, a true home for all human beings by resorting to the notion of goodness in dealing with

religion so that as many people as possible have their life convictions shaped by goodness. It should be stressed that, also as essential part of the paper's methodology, Christianity will be treated as a mere religion since all four ecodominical attempts analyzed here are, one way or another, connected to the Christian religion.

Thus, the four ecodominical positions which aim at using the notion of goodness in dealing with religion for the specific purpose of transforming the world from house to home and, in so doing, provide humanity with a safer environment for a meaningful existence are the following: first, John Shelby Spong, a liberal Episcopalian theologian who uses religion as religious philosophy to shape convictions devoid of any form of religion for a religion-free society; second, Ion Bria, a moderately traditional Eastern Orthodox theologian who focuses on religion as practical philosophy to shape convictions based on applied religion for a religion-transformed society; third, Vito Mancuso, a liberal Catholic theologian turned religious philosopher who sees religion as social philosophy to shape convictions based on a deconstructed religion for a religion-neutral society; and fourth, Desmond Tutu, a liberal Episcopalian theologian who deals with religion as social rights philosophy to shape convictions for a religion-positive society.

JOHN SHELBY SPONG: GOODNESS AS ECODOMY FOR A RELIGION-FREE SOCIETY

As one browses through John Shelby Spong's books, it becomes clear from the very start that he is not one's ordinary Christian. In fact, he is not a Christian at all, not in the traditional sense of the word, but he does claim to belong to Christianity in as much – or as less – as he makes reference to 'my Christian faith' (Spong, 2009: 223). This seems a bit awkward, even illogical, as his entire theological endeavor focuses on helping humanity move beyond religion. By religion, Spong means traditional Christianity which professes belief in a supernatural, transcendent, and ontologically real God, a God who/which, according to Spong, is no longer relevant because it erroneously makes people look for God beyond themselves. God, Spong argues, should be looked for not beyond humanity, but in and within humanity (Spong, 2009: 143).

In line with Spong, John Gunson explains that God is good for as long as he/it is accepted as a metaphor for 'goodness, truth, and love' as well as expressed 'in a human life' (Gunson, 2014: e-edition), not as ultimate existence of a transcendental, supernatural, and ontologically real

God. This is a 'religious paradigm' which must be allowed 'to die', Spong believes, because its definition of God makes humanity miss the whole point of its existence in the world. In order to find meaning, the ultimate meaning of life, humanity must no longer cling to the 'religious paradigm' of the past which presents a God defined by absolute alterity, but turn to 'this life', or life as existence in the world which, for Spong, is the only reality where meaning can be effectively found, rationally understood, and emotionally embraced. This why he says that, as epitome of meaningfulness, heaven must no longer be sought in 'something external to us' but in 'something that is part of us' (Spong, 2009: 143).

Since humanity is part of the world, the world itself – seen as creation in traditional Christianity – must be comprehended within the same parameters, not as having been created by a transcendent, supernatural, and ontologically real God but as having come into being by natural and material processes. While traditional Christianity promotes the idea of a good creation because it was reportedly created by a good transcendent, supernatural, and ontologically real God, contemporary human beings must not only resent such a philosophy but ideologically move beyond it (Spong, 2009: 142). As Michael Ferres points out, in Spong God is not personal; God is utterly incapable of inspiring goodness in human beings (Ferres, 2011: e-edition).

Thus, Spong indicates that the idea of goodness should no longer be attached to the supernatural God of traditional Christianity – or traditional theism for that matter – but it should be defined by the natural, material, and physical reality of the world. Goodness is not the result of God's creation, Spong explains; goodness "lies in the delicate balance of mineral, plant, animal, and human life in the totality of the environment" (Spong, 1999: 175). Thus, goodness is not the result of God's ontology, alterity, and transcendence; in other words, it is not a moral reality dependent on the supernatural character of God. Goodness is an ontological reality which belongs to the material reality of the world. In other words, goodness is not a spiritual concept, but rather a material fact. Yes, indeed, it can be theorized and turned into a concept, but it is, in the end, the very constitution of the material world. Human beings should not longer believe in the goodness of God, but in the goodness of creation (Spong, 1999: 174).

Why is it important to portray goodness as material and not spiritual, or as non-religious as opposed to religious? Because, as far as Spong is concerned, religion is the very opposition of goodness especially when

seen as associated with the idea of a transcendent, supernatural, and ontologically real God. Spong is convinced that a God defined by absolute alterity has nothing to do with humanity and it was in the name of such a God as well as in the name of religions inspired by such an image of God that wars were fought and people were killed. For Spong, any such religion – or any theistic religion for that matter – is the promotor of a supposedly negative and detrimental ‘religious agenda’ (Spong, 2009: 225). Paul Gilk correctly notices that what Spong does is a ‘hammering of theism’ which ”whacks six-day creation, the parting of the Red Sea, the sun standing still so the ancient Hebrews can win their battle, the virgin birth, the literal resurrection of Jesus” – in a nutshell, everything traditional which points at theism and its classical image of God’s alterity, supernaturalism, and transcendence (Gilk, 2012: 222).

Traditional theistic religions compromise human life, Spong believes, to the point that human beings suffer immensely not only physically but also mentally if they agree to submit themselves to the ‘religious paradigm’ of theistic images of God (Spong, 2009: 225). As Jimmy R. Watson writes, Spong no longer believes in the credibility of theism because it does not promote a ‘valid conception of God’ (Watson, 2015: 89). Thus, for Spong, traditional theistic religions – and Christianity as a religion in particular – cannot be ecodominical; they can never provide human beings with meaningful and positive lives. In order for human life to be meaningful, human beings must move beyond religion and in doing so they must rid themselves of theistic religions. More precisely, human beings must cease looking for goodness beyond humanity in a theistic image of God if they really want to find true, genuine goodness which is always resident within their own selves (Spong, 2009: 225).

Spong is convinced that there is inherent goodness and sacredness or holiness in life (Spong, 1988: 46), but this has nothing to do with the traditional theistic idea of God. God is not beyond humanity; God is in humanity – in the end, God is humanity. The goodness of life includes ‘physical material reality’ (Spong, 1998: 186) but not any reality of God described as ontological, transcendent, and supernatural. Religion is pernicious because it attempts to cover the threat of mortality; this is why human beings can find meaning only when they have moved beyond fear of death into accepting human life as it is: material and finite. This conviction should lead to the creation of a ‘new Christianity’ which, as George Demetrian explains, is the product of Spong’s ‘anti-theistic rhetoric’ (Demetrian, 2014: 6). Thus, in Spong, goodness works

as ecodominical attempt to convince humanity that the best way to provide itself with a safe environment in the world is not only to accept the world as essentially and materially good, but also to give up religion as meaning existential paradigm in favor of embracing finitude and matter as ultimate realities in a religion-free society.

ION BRIA: GOODNESS AS ECODOMY FOR A RELIGION-TRANSFORMED SOCIETY

If for Spong, ecodomy means convincing people that they are better off without the church or even without religion, Bria is situated at the other end of the religious spectrum: for him, the church is everything. An Eastern Orthodox theologian, Bria lived an important part of his life in the West, so his ecodominical attempt to convince people that the idea of good is important for their existence in the world starts with the church. The very first step in his attempt is to posit the existence of good and evil; not as theoretical constructs, but as actual realities. Thus, Bria points out that good and evil exist not only within the human condition or the human being itself – as Andrew Kirk also explains (Kirk, 2000: 70) – but also beyond it, in the very midst of society. It is here, within society, where the church must exist and carry out its mission; it is in the midst of good and evil that the church must establish itself as a ‘moral community’ (Bria, 1996: 166). In its capacity as moral community, the church must perform a series of ministries which all stem from the Gospel or the good news of salvation. Since the Gospel as good news is the very essence of the church’s ministry, it means that the whole work of the church is characterized by goodness, so the ministry of the church includes teaching, educating, and socially supporting as many people as possible within society, especially those who are in need.

It should be stressed here that, in Bria, goodness cannot be implemented unless understood in relationship with God. As an Eastern Orthodox theologian, Bria professes belief in a personal, transcendent, supernatural, and ontologically real God who is characterized by alterity by comparison with the human being. Quite obviously, Bria’s position is totally opposed to Spong’s whose belief in man’s capacity to enact goodness lies within himself; for Bria, however, man cannot do any good unless he has a personal relationship with God certified by personal faith and personal confession of one’s sins. Faith must always grow because if faith grows goodness abounds. Every believer must enact goodness for

the benefit of others; this is why Bria's ecodominical approach to goodness is based on what he calls 'the reawakening of the *laos*', or the need to make believers – in their capacity as people of God – fully aware of their divine mandate not only to believe in God but also, based on this belief, to perform goodness in all respects (Bria, 1989: 279). By engaging in the pursuit of goodness, the church not only applies the values of the Gospel as good news but also – as Carnegie Calian indicates rather poignantly – helps civil society (Calian, 2003: 47). There is no place for idleness in the church; in the very same vein with Bria, Walter W. Sawatsky explains that laity must strive to promote the priesthood of all believers by doing the mission of the church (Sawatsky, 2005: 264) to spread the good news and in so doing to enact goodness for the benefit of the whole society. In other words, all ordinary believers must be preoccupied to spread goodness by promoting reconciliation, aiding parish work, and integrating others in the mission of the church (Bria, 1996: 166-169).

Bria is famous for explaining the necessity that the church should promote 'the liturgy after the liturgy', a phrase which refers to the fact that the good news of the Gospel must never be kept within the church but taken beyond the church into society. In other words, the theoretical goodness of the church's convictions must be transformed in the applied goodness of the church's ministry (Bria, 1996: 7-9). In order for this to happen, Michael Plekon underlines that Christ must be preached and confessed, namely made known to contemporary society (Plekon, 2007: 240). This task, however, which aims at the implementation of common good in society has been performed historically by the church in close cooperation with the secular state. As Bria indicates, the church has worked together with the secular state in a 'symphony', so religion worked together with politics. Nevertheless, it is imperative – Bria points out – that the church should maintain a position of political autonomy and neutrality in its dealings with the state or with civil authorities (Bria, 1987: 297). From the perspective of the church, goodness is always meant to be applied in society; this is why Bria writes about the church's 'social apostolate' (Bria, 1996: 181-183), whereby the church must make sure that goodness is performed by making people aware socially and politically, defending freedom (including religious freedom), imparting social justice, and – in John Witte Jr.'s example – securing human rights (Witte, Jr. 2006: 91-92).

Bria's ecodominical approach to goodness is totally opposed to the ideology promoted by Spong, who wants to make people aware of their

need to give up religion. In Bria, religion must be assumed and its convictions permanently and actively enacted in society. The theology of the church is the quintessence of goodness since the Gospel itself, the very essence of the church's theology, is nothing but good news. As far as Bria is concerned, everybody must be made aware of this goodness; this is why, believers must be socially engaged in helping the poor, supporting marginalized women or youth, providing assistance to the unemployed as well as to everybody who faces hardships of any sort. If in Spong giving up religion is an ecodomic sign of secularization, in Bria what should be considered ecodomic is convincing believers to fight against and even reject the values promoted by secularization (Bria, 1987: 300).

One of the most effective ways to oppose secularization in order to promote the ecodomic value of goodness is to follow the example of the ancient church which, according to Betty and Martin Bailey, was deeply concerned with education (Bailey, 2003: 9-10). This is how the ecodomy of goodness can be promoted by the church: a new generation of people convinced of as well as concerned with the common good of the entire society will emerge only if the church (in Bria's case, the Eastern Orthodox Church) strives to promote theological education – and the church's message of good news – in tertiary education, secondary schools, and mass media (Bria, 1996: 173) in a religion-transformed society.

VITO MANCUSO: GOODNESS AS ECODOMY FOR A RELIGION-NEUTRAL SOCIETY

Mancuso is ideologically situated somewhere between Spong, who wants to rid society of religion, and Bria, whose intention is to convince the whole of society to embrace religion. Mancuso is not against religion, but he does not mind too much if religion is pursued or not. In fact, he uses religion in order to extract from it a series of theological and philosophical images which he translates for the contemporary society. In his capacity as (left wing) Hegelian philosopher of religion and liberal theologian, Mancuso does not discard the Christian religion but he does not urge anybody to embrace it either because God is not a personal reality which exists as 'absolute alterity' and 'absolute freedom' (Mancuso, 2005: 170).

For him, the Christian religion is good because it contains within itself the best ideological imagery produced by human spirituality. Christianity and its theology must never be taken literally, so the Gospel and all the teachings of the Christian religion must be interpreted spiritually or philosophically. Antonio Signori clarifies this aspect when he explains that, in Mancuso, human rationality is in fact called divinity, so the human mind is nothing less than what people have always called God; in this context, Signori writes, the ideal of goodness is to "extend this philosophy of life to the entire history and nature" (Signori 2012: 15).

For instance, in order to explain that the whole Gospel is a conglomerate of concepts which must be applied to the practical aspects of daily life, Mancuso resorts to the 'essence of God', defined not as absolutely unfathomable but rather as perfectly rational. In his book, God is not 'impenetrable mystery' but 'love and goodness' (Mancuso, 2005: 171). If the very essence of God is goodness, it means that this 'good news' must be communicated to as many people as possible so that they readjust and consequently lead their lives in full accordance with the idea of goodness. This is why Velia Vadalà underscores that, in Mancuso, the human being must live in total freedom if goodness is to be performed in society as 'image and likeness of God' (Vadalà, 2009: 209, n. 5).

However, in order for God to be understood as goodness, one must leave aside theistic interpretations of God – in this respect, he stands with Spong – and embrace anthropological criteria for the definition of God; this is the only way which leads anybody to conclude that God is goodness. If people understand that God is goodness or, even better, goodness is God, then the imagery of Old Testament sacrifices must be replaced by the imagery of New Testament's ultimate sacrifice of Christ which – as Giulio Michelini points out – is the very principle of creation in Mancuso's thought (Michelini, 2009: 399). In other words, when people understand that God is goodness and all we must do in life is strive to be as good as possible, nobody is going to be killed in the name of religion – again, in this Mancuso agrees with Spong – because people will try their best to live for the benefit of others and the common good of the whole society – very much in line with Bria's conviction (Mancuso, 2005: 171).

Understanding that God is good is only possible through the spirit; not the Holy Spirit of traditional theology, but the spirit as universal feature of humanity which allows every person to comprehend that the

task of life is the enactment of goodness for the benefit of everybody. In Mancuso, universal human love – the very antithesis of selfishness, as Giovanni Braidi explains (Braidi, 2010: 126) – is the purpose of goodness and this can be achieved only if / when people embrace the image of Christ as abolition of the traditional theology's qualitative difference between God and humanity. In other words, in Mancuso God is no longer personal, supernatural, totally transcendent, and ontologically real. The image of Christ cancels this sort of theology; in the New Testament, Mancuso argues, God and man become one in the person of Christ, so any relevant theology nowadays will be based on this conviction, namely that God is humanity and humanity is God (Mancuso, 2008: 172). Following this logic, God is goodness and goodness is God, so humanity is goodness and goodness is humanity.

In Mancuso's understanding, the Christian religion provides the whole humanity, not only Christians, with an image of God which is totally and absolutely human. God is no longer transcendent, he is material and physical – in the words of Michel Nula, 'God is life, truth and life' as well as an 'intelligent matrix' (Nula, 2014: e-book). God is the human being itself as we realize when we understand the image of Christ. These days, society must no longer cling to the traditional theological and theistic doctrine of God but to an anthropological and even a-theistic image of Christ as representative of the whole humanity. Anthropocentrism – this is the philosophy which must be embraced by contemporary society otherwise, Mancuso explains, God cannot be understood and accepted as love and goodness (Mancuso, 2008: 174).

The human being, however, is not just a material entity which is capable of defining itself anthropologically as God or which, having contemplated the concept of God, is now intelligent enough to understand that it refers to itself. In its capacity as God, the human being must understand that it must surpass itself; Orlando Franceschelli, for instance, shows that, in Mancuso, man has the innate capacity to move beyond itself despite what evolutionism regards as 'man's crudeness' (Franceschelli, 2009: 109). Thus, in Mancuso, the human being must constantly attempt to move beyond itself, to nurture noble feelings which allow it to seek not only his good fortune but also the common good of everybody (Mancuso, 2008: 174). It is only when the human being is capable of transcending its own self and person in order to enact goodness for the sake of the common good that human life has achieved genuine ecodomy.

Where is love there is God, where is goodness there is God, where is goodness there is humanity – this is the essence of Mancuso's understanding of ecodomy as goodness. It does not matter whether one is a Christian or not; in fact, it does not matter if one embraces a religion or is just non-religious. According to Mancuso, what truly matters is for one to understand that the purpose of his life is to practically implement goodness for the sake of others. Even if religion is neutral for Mancuso, if anyone wishes to embrace religion, then – to quote Francesco Azzarello – the true meaning of religion is "the superiority of the common good over individual good" (Azzarello, 2009: 46). When this happens in society, the reality of God has been made manifest irrespective of whether one believes in God or not or whether one is religious or not (Mancuso, 2008: 177-178). Religion is not important; religion is, in fact, neutral. What is important though lies in man's capacity to understand that his life's purpose resides in enacting goodness on a daily basis for the benefit of the entire society. It is enough to do good to be God(?), Mancuso writes, and it is this conviction that turns his religious philosophy into an ecodomy of goodness for a society in which religion has a neutral value while goodness is everything.

DESMOND TUTU: GOODNESS AS ECODOMY FOR A RELIGION-POSITIVE SOCIETY

In South Africa, where Desmond Tutu has ministered as Episcopal theologian, singling out one religion among the many indigenous African religions is conspicuous if not even dangerous. It was before the days of the Apartheid and so it is nowadays, mainly because Christianity – in all its forms and confessions – is associated with Western thought and Colonial patterns (Twesigye, 2010: 92). This is why, in doing theology or in dealing with specific issues related to his South African context, Tutu does not seem to insist on his Christian theology and convictions but rather on using his Christian background to single out fundamental human features which can be not only common to all people but also used by all people for a real improvement of society. One such fundamental human feature is goodness, which Tutu refers to to such an extent that it becomes an ecodomic attempt to transform the world in a society in which religion is accepted in positive terms. This is because, as Tutu points out, 'we are made for goodness' (Tutu, 2010: 4).

Tutu's most basic conviction appears to be that people are 'fundamentally good' because it is in the human being's instinct to react against evil and wrong to the point of abhorrence. Yes, indeed, Tutu concedes, human beings do bad things and evil is no stranger to people but, despite this rather harsh and evident reality, evil is not what defines us. In this respect, Stephen Cherry correctly shows that, in Tutu, 'goodness is stronger than evil' (Cherry, 2012: 202); it is what confirms out humanity. This is why Tutu reiterates the fact that goodness is so inextricably connected to the very essence of humanity that one can say that 'wrong is not the norm' (Tutu, 2010: 5). Actually, it is the very fact that 'wrong is not the norm' which leads to the conclusion that human beings are fundamentally good. How do we know that evil is not the norm? We are appalled by evil, we marvel – negatively – at the sight of evil, and we are abhorred by it; this explains why evil is news. Even if evil appears to be all-encompassing and a dominating force in the world, Tutu is adamant about its validity. Evil is not the norm, Tutu insists; the only reality which can and should be set as norm for humanity and its existence in the world is goodness (Tutu, 2010: 5).

Leaving aside the fact that the human being's fascination for evil might indicate that the evil rather than goodness is the norm, the way Tutu builds his argument appears to be heavily anchored in theological romanticism. For instance, having established the fact that goodness is the norm for human life, Tutu sets up to demonstrate his theological and existential theory by pointing out a series of human feelings which, in his opinion, are produced by human goodness, and appear to confirm – as revealed by Mark C. Murphy – the mandatory character of goodness as moral norm (Murphy, 2017: 24). Concretely, admiration, respect, and reverence are human emotions which appear to be triggered by goodness. This is why, Tutu explains, we are all attracted by the goodness of people like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. In all these case, writes Tutu, people are literally 'transfixed' by the sheer goodness promoted, displayed, and enacted by these militants for social justice (Tutu, 2010: 5).

It is important to notice at this point that, in Tutu's understanding, the ecodomic value of goodness resides not as much in its capacity to ignite noble sentiments in other people but in the fact that it commands respect even after the actual death of those who lived in goodness throughout their lives. In other words, goodness is ecodomic because it

manages to transcend death and humanity itself in the sense that the value of goodness does not decrease after the death of its promoter(s). Regarding this aspect, Tutu's argument resembles Peter Byrne's conviction that 'transcendent goodness' is 'human goodness, specifically moral goodness' (Byrne, 1995: 142). Human beings cannot but appreciate goodness, and especially its moral character, because it is anchored and implanted in their innermost depths of personal and communitarian spirituality; in Tutu's words, "we are programmed – no, hard-wired – for goodness" (Tutu, 2010: 6).

Against possible criticism that since it triggers other feelings goodness may be instinctual, Tutu makes it clear that 'goodness is not just our impulse'. Goodness is much more than that; it is what defines humanity, it is what makes human beings human, it is – as he puts it – 'our essence' (Tutu, 2010: 6). Since goodness is the very substance of humanity, it means that it can and should, in fact it must be accessed and utilized by every person, by every human being because – as underlined by Kevin W. Hector – 'our essence must be achieved' (Hector, 2015: 234). This is why Tutu underscores the capacity of goodness to change 'everything'. Accessing one's core goodness should be relatively easy; as Tutu points out, people 'need to rediscover' goodness and then 'act accordingly'. Specifically in his case, goodness – Tutu emphasizes – influenced not only the way he treated other people but also the way he 'read the Bible' (Tutu, 2010: 7).

This is a very important observation because, since it can affect one's reading of the Bible, goodness appears to have a positive impact on religion itself for as long as – in Jeffrey Wattles' rendering – 'persons of every religion and of no religion' act 'for the greater good' (Wattles, 2016: xxii). When reading Tutu, it appears as if goodness were not exclusively a theoretical notion but rather an idea which automatically and spiritually inspires people to act accordingly as well as enact its theoretical content into practice. In Tutu, goodness does not depend on religion, but religion does seem to depend on religion. Goodness, as it were, can make religion better; it is capable of transforming one's religious perceptions, convictions, and actions. Religion is important for Tutu, but not fundamentally important. One may be a Christian or a non-Christian, one may be religious or non-religious but what truly matters is that one be good. As Tutu puts it, some people read the Bible 'as sacred text' others just as 'good literature' (Tutu 2010: 8); this ultimately fades away in comparison with goodness.

It is crucially important, Tutu warns, for us to understand the our innermost essence is good, not evil. Whether this is ontological or just a perspective people choose to adopt when looking at as well as within their own selves is not exactly clear in Tutu, but this is somehow irrelevant because what matters is the apprehension of the human being's essential goodness. This is why human beings must always presume good, not bad intentions from other people. In the latter case, Christians will always disparage Muslims, and Palestinians will distrust Israelis. Tutu's optimistic perspective assumes goodness in spite of evil because he equates goodness with God. Human beings, he insists, 'are made by God, for God, like God' (Tutu, 2010: 8) which, when deciphered and translated in a purely anthropological key, becomes a profession of one's conviction that human beings 'are made by goodness, for goodness, like goodness'. Even though Tutu does not use these exact words but he does refer to man's most fundamental desire 'for God' which is in fact a desire for goodness. Humanity can reach God only when / if it first reaches goodness (Tutu, 2010: 12-13). In Tutu, goodness is an ecodomi-cal attempt to improve the world and the human beings by using religion in a positive way. As Jennifer Herdt noticed, in Tutu, religion can be positive or negative, but if goodness is promoted religion will be good, and it is always preferable to see religion in positive terms (Herdt, 2013: 107, n. 3).

CONCLUSION: PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER IN A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper moves from practice to theory in an attempt to pinpoint ideological constructs which have the potential to provide humanity with positive and constructive notions meant to turn human life and experience into a safer reality throughout the world. The practical aspect which is the very start of this article has to do with the fact that these days religion has been blamed for a wide range of catastrophes orchestrated by individual or organizations associated, voluntarily or not, with religious ideology and religious life. Regardless of whether one refers to Islam, Christianity or any other religion for that matter – although in the West the first two appear to have caught the public interest in igniting various debates – radical approaches to specific religions have been

blamed for homophobic ideas and practical manifestations. With the recent threat of Islamic terrorism fueled by radical Muslim ideologies but also the Syrian/Middle East and North African migrations, the West – especially in Europe and the European Union – has been forced to face not only the theoretical tents of radical Islam but also its practical exhibition of terrorist activity.

However, it was not the purpose of this paper to deal with the positivity or negativity of religious ideology but rather with the question of whether there is a real possibility in finding constructive religious ideas which have the potential to transform the world in a practical way. To a certain degree, the methodology of this paper aimed at moving beyond religion into the realm of those who practice religion, namely people of all sorts of races, backgrounds, and beliefs. Concretely, what emerges beyond religion is the reality of humanity, of every human being considered both individually and communally not only as theoretical adherents but also as practical enforcers of religious convictions into daily living. This is why, as far as the methodology of this paper is concerned, the positivity or the negativity of religion was not considered since the focus of the article was directed towards the human being who philosophizes and experiences religion in all its complexity. Again, based on common sense observation and quite regardless of theoretical approaches to humanity's moral essence, this paper concentrated on the idea of goodness which is associated with human thinking and living.

In other words, while this paper was not meant to investigate whether human beings are inherently good or evil, the intention of the research was to see if goodness – in theory and practice – can be used in a positive way as one deals with religion or, quite simply, if goodness can be singled out as having the potential to enrich the world by transforming society in a positive way so that as many people as possible could be said to enjoy a positive standard of life not only in theory but also in practice. In spite of religious radicalism of all sorts, can goodness be selected to represent a vital concept which – used across the complex religious spectrum – has the capacity to provide humanity with a better and safer life in the world?

Methodologically, two scholarly approaches to religion influenced this paper's approach to idea of goodness as connected with religious thought and practice. The first is based on the idea of ecodomy defined by Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz as 'constructive process'. Originally, the term was used in the New Testament to refer to the actual establishment

and development of early Christian communities across the Roman Empire; Müller-Fahrenholz, however, expanded its initial meaning to refer to anything to 'any constructive process' which happens throughout the world. Thus, ecodomy was literally extracted from its original Christian and religious milieu and re-rooted into the non-Christian and even non-religious context of the world and its contemporary secular developments. This is why, for Müller-Fahrenholz, ecodomy refers to the art of inhabiting not the church but the world in order to transform not the church but the world into a house for every human being. The second approach was inspired by Ernst Conradie which continues Müller-Fahrenholz's efforts to expand the range of meanings associated with the concept of ecodomy. Thus, if for Müller-Fahrenholz ecodomy is a theoretical construct which speaks about the human being's capacity to learn how to transform the world into its house, Conradie takes the notion a bit further into by pointing out that ecodomy should perhaps be considered not only the art to transform the world into our house but also into our home. It is not enough to see the world as house or shelter; human beings need more than just a physical venue for their lives. They need a spiritual places for their existence, so ecodomy speaks not only about making the world inhabitable as our house but also about transforming the world in its capacity as house into a genuine home, where human lives are not only protected physically but also nurtured spiritually.

The whole discussion about ecodomy, however, was almost impossible to be detached from religion – and this is a serious limitation of this paper. An even more serious limitation is the fact that ecodomy was discussed exclusively in connection with the religious spectrum of Christianity, even if both traditional and liberal perspectives were taken into account. This is why this paper focuses only on how the concept of ecodomy works within the Christian religious tradition but, as both Müller-Fahrenholz and Conradie point out, the potential is there for it to be applied everywhere in the world, in theory and practice, in religious and in secular contexts. For the purposes of this paper though, the notion of ecodomy was demonstrated to work positively if / when connected to the idea of goodness throughout the complex reality of the Christian religion.

Thus, from liberal Episcopalians like John Shelby Spong (who sees goodness as ecodomy when it can help human beings give up religion)

and traditional Easter Orthodox believers like Ion Bria (for whom goodness as ecodominy works only in a society dominated by religion) to liberal Catholics like Vito Mancuso (who is convinced that goodness is ecodominical only if religion has neutral value) and, again, liberal Episcopalians like Desmond Tutu (who accepts goodness in ecodominical terms if religion is ascribed positivity), the results appear to be the same. Regardless of whether goodness is approached ecodominically in the mainly Protestant United States of America by Spong, in the Eastern Orthodox Central Europe's Romania by Bria, in the Catholic Southern Europe's Italy by Mancuso, or in South Africa's indigenous religions by Tutu, the positive aspect of the notion as well as its capacity to provide humanity with a safer existence irrespective of how religion is perceived and even beyond religion is obvious. Nonetheless, how the theoretical significance of goodness as ecodominy is turned into practice so that the world literally becomes both our house and our home is not only a different matter but also the subject of a different scientific investigation.

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