



# *De excrementis diaboli* – Some reflections on an almost total absence of a practical implication of a theology of creation in the public speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism\*

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## Abstract

Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves (1933-2014) was one of the most creative thinkers Latin American theology has ever produced. In *De excrementis diaboli* (“On the Devil’s excrements”), a short text published in 1998 in Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, Alves plays with the idea of trash as the excrements the Devil puts in the world to mock of God’s creation. Alves states that he never heard any sermon preached by any religious leader about how to care for God’s creation dealing correctly with garbage. Following this Alvesian intuition, this article intends to present that a biblical theology of creation has many implications for both a public theology and for a prophetic speech by the church as well. However, this aspect of dealing with garbage as a way of stewardship of creation is by and large almost ignored in the public speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism. In the majority of Brazilian Evangelicalism, when one speaks about a theology of creation, it is only as an apologetic fight against the theory of evolution. This is an influence of the Fundamentalist movement in the theoretical framework of Brazilian Evangelicalism. The aim of this article is to present how Alve’s text can become the starting point for producing a fresh public theology of creation in Brazilian Evangelicalism leading to effective custodianship of our fragile planet.

**Keywords:** Rubem Alves, public theology, theology of creation, stewardess of environment, theoethics

## Introduction

Seldom when one thinks about *Place and space: theological perspectives on living in the world* one thinks of garbage as a theological problem and as a locus for a public theology. *Contra* this general tendency this article has to do with three dimensions, that are: the first one is the space we live in. Space with garbage of any kind (domestic and/or industrial) in it is obviously a problem, a problem that is getting worse every year. This problem is even worse in the so called developing countries. The second dimension is

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God and space: a sound and contextualized theology of creation today implies in dealing somehow with the problem of garbage. Garbage in the space we live in is a new kind of social (and individual as well) *sin*, so to speak, and by and large it has been almost completely ignored by theologians in all positions within the theological spectrum, ranging from the most closed fundamentalist to the most open progressive.

Therefore, to raise the question of garbage in this big *oikos*, that is this planet we live in, is an unavoidable challenge for a Christian public discourse today, because garbage is a *global* problem, from the most impoverished to the most affluent habitats (obviously it is much worse in impoverished countries). This leads to the last dimension, that is sacred space: Christian churches in and within societies today need to answer to this question: what a Christian public theology today has to say before such a problem, that is present in all of our societies? Christian churches today are challenged to raise a prophetic voice of alert, as a conscience of society, to the problem of garbage in creation. Even though the main focus of this article is the Brazilian context, the paper is interesting for concerned Christians all over the world as pollution is a global phenomenon plaguing most societies, except perhaps Singapore.

Therefore, this article has a threefold structure and a conclusion, as follows:

- (1) the importance of a theology of creation;
- (2) the theme of creation in the speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism;
- (3) *De excrementis diaboli*: Rubem Alves's prophetic critique of the (almost) absolute absence of the theme of care of creation in the speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism; concluding remarks.

### **The importance of a theology of creation**

*Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, creatorem caeli et terrae* – “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth”.

So begins the Apostle's Creed, the oldest and most widespread symbol of faith the church universal. The Apostle's Creed is literally an ecumenical property of the church in all ages and in all around the planet. Our spiritual forefathers who wrote this *confessio* were wise enough to begin the Creed by following the very first message of the Bible: the world is, the world exists because God created it.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1, ESV). The declaration that God created the whole cosmos is like a thread that runs all over the Bible, literally from Genesis to Revelation. Just three examples will be cited, extracted from each one of the classical threefold division of the *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible, viz., Torah (The Law), Neb'im (The Prophets) and Ketubim (The Writings):

#### **Torah**

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11, English Standard Version, from now on,



ESV, emphasis added). One must observe that the reason given by the text to take off one day out of seven for rest is that the Lord created “heaven and eaerth, the sea and all that is in them”.

### **Neb'im**

<sup>12</sup>“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Isaiah 55.12, ESV). The prophet sings the joyfulness of the “new Exodus” (the return of the exile in Babilon) and declares that the nature itself, represented by mountains and trees, will praise the Lord for that.

### **Ketubim**

<sup>8</sup>Let the rivers clap their hands, let the hills sing for joy together, <sup>9</sup> before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity (Psalm 98:8-9, ESV). This poetry speaks about the joy that surrounds the eschatological expectation of the nature: the Lord comes for doing justice, therefore, even rivers and hills rejoice at his presence.

As a matter of fact, there is a plethora of biblical texts that celebrate the immense variety of creation, that is work of the hands of the Lord. Therefore, any theology, understood as a reflection of faith having the Bible as its *fons et origo* (“source and origin”), it does not matter if it is produced in a North Atlantic *Sitz im Leben* (“life context”) or in a Latin American or in a South African one must take seriously a reflection on the theme of creation. It is not by chance that the very first statement the second narrative of creation declares about man is that God put man to take care of the creation: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). And it is not a mere detail that the biblical text calls the “house” God created and put man to take care of is called a garden.

It must be this way, because, as already stated, the faith of Israel and the faith of the first followers of Jesus proclaimed and sung the praise of the God who created the heavens and earth. The history of Christian spirituality reveals great examples of a piety formed and informed by a theology of creation. Just two (among many) examples will be cited: 1) the “open air” spirituality, or “creation-centred spirituality” (according to Ian Bradley) of the Celtic Christianity of the British Isles (c. V-VI AD) and (2) the very well-known spirituality of nature of St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226), whose *Canticum of the Creatures* is a fine example<sup>1</sup>.

In sum: Christian theology is – or should be – by its own nature concerned with creation. It is not only a coincidence that the Bible begins and ends with a narrative of trees, a river... Besides, a true Christian theology is – or should be – always public. And the theme of the care of creation is public *par excellence*. Therefore, public theology must face the issue of the care of the environment. However, there is a problem: consciously or unconsciously much of Christian theology has been more platonic than biblical in nature, owing more to Plato than to the poets/prophets of Israel. The concern of much of such a theology has been the world to come, and not the present world.

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<sup>1</sup> For critical biographies of Francis of Assisi see, inter alia, Le Goff, Spotto.



However, it is necessary to add that many theologians have dealt with the theme of the care of creation. When one speaks about this it cannot be forgotten that there is such a rich contribution to the theological reflection on this topic. Some examples could be cited, and it is interesting to observe that these examples come from a wide range in the theological spectrum, varying from a very conservative to a more wide open progressive.

As early as in the 1970 there was the work of American theologian Francis Schaeffer<sup>2</sup> entitled *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Written from a very conservative perspective, this little book has as its main merit the fact that it was written for a public that has a tendency to uphold a Fundamentalist perspective in the understanding of theology is what for and how it should be understood. Unfortunately – in Brazil at least – where Schaeffer is very popular among many Evangelicals with a more closed theological framework, this work did not generally succeed in generating an ecologically driven level of consciousness.

Other very important theological reflections on this issue of a ethical concern with nature and environmental stewardship are the sober and profound analysis of the German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann<sup>3</sup>, the project of a global ethics of the German Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng<sup>4</sup> and the work of Catholic Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff<sup>5</sup>.

### **The theme of creation in the speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism**

After presenting the theme of the care of creation in the Bible and some recent theological approaches to such a theme it is time to go on to the second part of this article: the theme of creation in the speech of Brazilian Evangelicalism. Brazil has one of the largest Evangelical populations in the world, and this population has increasing in the last decades. It will be interesting to present some official data of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics:

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<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, Francis. *Pollution and the Death of Man*.

<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, God in Creation. *An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. London: SCM Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Küng, Global Responsibility. *In Search of a New World Ethics*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Boff, *Ecologia: grito da terra, grito dos pobres*. São Paulo: Ática, 1995.



Years	Catholics		Evangelicals	
	Population	Averageannualgrowth	Population	Averageannualgrowth
1991	121.812.771		13.157.383	
2000	124.980.132	0,29%	26.184.941	7,95%
2010	123.280.172	0,14%	42.275.440	4,91%

**Table 1.** Brazilian Evangelical population growth 1991-2010

**Source:** Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics

Of all these different groups, all gathered together under the umbrella of “Evangelicals”, almost all (c. 80%) are Pentecostals or Neopentecostals. The remaining 20% are the Classical (or “Historical”) Protestants, like, e.g., Lutherans and Presbyterians<sup>6</sup>. But one must note, as it will be shown later on in this article, there is a considerable influence based upon a Fundamentalist theology. Let us see the main characteristics of these main groups of Evangelicals in Brazil:

- The Pentecostals by and large are concerned only with “salvation of the soul”: you certainly shall die, but if you have Jesus as your only personal Savior your soul will go to heaven;
- The Neopentecostals, with their “health and wealth gospel”, are concerned only with how to become more affluent and succeeded in life;
- The Classical Protestants, influenced by a Fundamentalist theology are obsessed with “theological correctness”.

Let us see just one example from this last group: for a considerable number of Presbyterians in Brazil the Westminster Confession (1643-1649) is the only true system of interpretation of Scriptures. As there was no ecological problem in the days of the divines of Westminster, theologians today are not concerned about such a problem. Besides, say those who agree with this Fundamentalist theological framework, God is sovereign, thus we do not need to concern about the ecological problem. If God wants, He will solve this problem without human participation.

A third point related to Brazilian Protestants guided by a Fundamentalist mentality: when in their discourse there is any reference to the creation, it is only in a context of a controversy against evolutionism<sup>7</sup>. Such a polemic approach like this is not constructive, as far as a public theology and a diaconal/pastoral holistic mission of the church in the world is concerned. As a result, by different reasons the theme of the care of creation is virtually absent in the discourses of Pentecostalism, Neopentecostalism and Fundamentalist Protestantism in Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent (2019) approach to the phenomenon of the Evangelical growth in Brazil, with special emphasis on the challenges presented by the “health and wealth gospel” of the so called Theology of Prosperity, very well known in Brazilian and in South African context as well, see the chapter by Rudolf Von Sinner, a German Swiss theologian rooted in Brazil in his *Teologia Pública num Estado Laico. Ensaios e análises*. In his chapter Von Sinner combines a sociological and a theological approach (with a distinct Lutheran emphasis) to the theme of Theology of Prosperity.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of how the theory of evolutionism became a problem for American Fundamentalism see Marsden, George. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, p. 153-181.



## The prophetic critique of Rubem Alves to the (virtually) absolute absence of the theme of care of creation in Brazilian Evangelical speech

After having presented the importance of a theology of creation and the main characteristics of the main representatives of Evangelical population in Brazil it is time to go on the core of this article, that is: the critique done by Rubem Alves to the practically absolute absence of the care of creation in the Brazilian Evangelical speech. But first it is necessary a word, even in sum, about Rubem Alves (from now on, RA). A very prolific author<sup>8</sup>, RA produced many a book in such a vast array of subjects, in different areas, such as theory of religion<sup>9</sup>, sociology of Brazilian Protestantism<sup>10</sup>, children's literature<sup>11</sup>, theory of education<sup>12</sup> and chronicles of the daily life<sup>13</sup>.

For obvious reasons RA is a very well known in a Brazilian context, and his work has been studied from different perspectives, mainly from a theological point of view. Considering his influence in the field of theory of education, there are many approaches to his work from the this perspective of theory of education as well.

RA broke up with a traditional way of thinking and doing theology. Traditional theology, it does not matter if it is conservative or progressive, it does not matter also if it is Protestant or Catholic, by and large has been written in a highly rationalistic theoretical framework. RA, using Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as a theoretical tool for building up his own theology, stated that a rationalistic language cannot vehicle correctly the mystery of God. In a poetical way RA declared that God is a bird that cannot be caught in any net... According to RA, this net would be the rationalistic language used by theologians. One can speak about God, says RA, only if he/she uses a language that is not rationalistic. RA believed that one could speak about God only if he/she uses a symbolic language, and not a rationalistic one. For RA, poetry would be more appropriated to speak about the mystery of God than the rationalistic language of traditional theology. Just because of that he was one of the pioneers in the use of what has been termed *theopoetics* – the poetics and the poetry of speaking about God.

Having presented no more than a bit of the vast work of RA, now our attention turns to the main point of this article, that is one of his chronicles of the daily life, specifically, *De excrementis diaboli*, that was originally published in *Folha de S. Paulo*, the largest Brazilian newspaper in November 22, 1998<sup>14</sup>. A summary of the text may be presented as follows:

RA begins with the statement that he had the desire to promulgate an encyclical → *De excrementis diaboli*. To justify such an unusual declaration, RA goes on reminding his readers of his past in the rural área of the Minas Gerais State of old, when there were no trash: chickens, pigs, cats and dogs ate the leftovers and there were no plastic. "Trash

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<sup>8</sup> RA produced his stuff in Portuguese, his mother tongue. As some of his material were translated into English or Spanish, in what comes now there will be cited preferably (but not exclusively) his texts available in such languages.

<sup>9</sup> Inter alia, *Tomorrow's Child; The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*.

<sup>10</sup> Inter alia, *Protestantism and Repression*.

<sup>11</sup> Rubem Alves wrote many a book for children. Of all of this great production the one which is probably the most famous is *A menina e o pássaro encantado* – "The girl and the charming bird".

<sup>12</sup> Inter alia, *La alegría de enseñar*.

<sup>13</sup> Inter alia, *Transparencies of Eternity; The Best Chronicles of Rubem Alves*.

<sup>14</sup> It is a curious coincidence that this chronicle was published in the same day that 35 years before American President John F. Kennedy, English author Aldous Huxley and British literary critic and theologian C. S. Lewis have died.



was integrated to life”<sup>15</sup>. But in contemporary world trash is such a huge problem: “Today the problem of garbage has apocalyptic and infernal proportions”. After this RA presents three experiences he had in three different cities:

1. Campinas (where he lived for many years), specifically Campinas State University, one of the best public universities in the country<sup>16</sup>.
2. Caruaru (Pernambuco State, in Northeast Brazil), where there is a huge free fair)
3. Aparecida do Norte (São Paulo State), where there are pilgrimages of Catholic people to the “Sanctuary of Our Lady Appeared”)

In all these cities people left tons of garbage behind, with no concern at all about the carelessness of their actions. He states: “So I realized that I never ever had heard any priest, any pastor, any guru, any seer, any missionary, any bishop preaching a sermon against garbage. For trash is to the world as sin is to souls. If it is necessary to clean the souls, it is also necessary to clean the world”. The first part of the encyclical establishes the foundation of a new religious order, whose charisma would be the care of garbage and whose main task would be picking up trash in the streets. According to RA, if the Franciscans have the care of the poor as their charisma, and the Camilians have the care of sick people as their main task – *charisma* – this new religious order his encyclical would create would have the cleansing of the streets and squares of cities and towns as their religious calling. The second part of the encyclical would establish that scattering garbage carelessly is a mortal sin. Therefore, in the confessions the priest would ask this question to the confessant: ‘What about trash my son/daughter? How much trash have you scattered in this world of God?’ Finally, the encyclical would establish as penances for sins the collecting of trash scattered in the streets.

“Lies? Five bags full of garbage  
Marital infidelity? Fifteen bags full of garbage  
Violence? Fifty bags full of garbage  
And so on...”

Alves finishes his text saying: “If this encyclical will never be promulgated the religious leaders could at least play with this idea...”.

### Concluding remarks

It is interesting to present a few observations regarding RA’s text:

- 1) RA in his text deliberately uses a religious language and terminology framed within the Roman Catholic tradition – I think he did so as a rhetorical way to persuade his readers, considering that the majority of them would be from a Catholic background;
- 2) RA boldly dares to propose a new – a fourth one – theological virtue: *cleansing*: “Cleansing is a theological <sup>17</sup>virtue”;

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<sup>15</sup> The quotations between comas are from RA’s text and were translated into English by the author of this article.

<sup>16</sup> RA was a lecturer at the Department of Philosophy of the UNICAMP (Campinas State University) for many years after his returning to Brazil, until his retirement, when he dedicated himself only to lectures and to the production of texts.

<sup>17</sup> RA was a staunch Protestant. He was a very harsh critic of the official establishment of Protestantism in Brazil – see for instance his aforementioned *Protestantism and Repression* (“Protestantismo e Repressão”). However, he deliberately in *De excrementis diaboli* he deliberately used a strong Catholic



- 3) Following RA's logic we would have a new list of theological virtues: faith, hope, charity... and *cleansing*. One can wonder if Thomas Aquinas would agree or not with this proposition of adding cleansing to the list of theological virtues – faith, hope and charity (or love). If RA's proposal is to be accepted we would have no more seven virtues (three theological and four cardinals), being seven the traditional symbolic number of perfection in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but eight virtues, being four theological and the same four cardinals of the well established Mediaeval tradition;
- 4) RA was a pioneer in pointing to garbage as a problem for a Christian theological reflection and for a Christian ethics. He proposed that garbage is a sin – an ecological sin, a sin against the beauty of God's creation. In this way he was ahead of his time, because even though before he wrote this text there were some theological reflections on the nature as a creation of God<sup>18</sup> and the ethical implications that come from this acknowledge, he was thus the very first to call the attention of his readers to garbage as an ethical issue.
- 5) For someone living in a North Atlantic context it is difficult to understand why RA gave such a deep and heavy emphasis on garbage and trash, to the point of calling cleansing 'a theological virtue'. But it will be much easier to understand that if one comprehends the Brazilian context.
- 6) RA had the tendency to be ironical in many of his texts. This irony was a way to present his criticism to many different situations in life. I think this irony is present in *De excrementis diaboli*, when he toys with the idea of a papal encyclical presenting a new comprehension of sin: the ecological sin. If one believes that God created the world and, as it was already stated, that God put man in the garden to take care of it, as its custodian, it is a sin to act against nature and the environment. Therefore, RA was right when he suggested that one can sin against him/herself, against his/her neighbor, against God and also against the environment. In other words: there is the individual sin, the social sin, but there is also the environmental sin.
- 7) RA in a way was ahead of his time when he published *De excrementis diaboli*: he published it in 1998. It was only in 2015 that Pope Francis issued *Laudato Si'*, the very first time in history that a Roman Pope dealt with the problem of environment in an official document. Following this line of reasoning it would be very interesting if the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance publish official documents or recommendations to their member churches expressing concern to the issue of environmental stewardship.
- 8) Almost a quarter of a century after the publication of *De excrementis diaboli*, the situation of garbage in Brazilian society unfortunately become far worse, due mainly to the growth of population and to a radical failure in Brazilian public education, where there is no

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language – Pope, encyclical, religious orders, confession, penances, and so on – as a rhetorical tool to emphasise his point. Considering the influence of the Catholic tradition in Brazilian society he was very "clever", so to speak, when he used this expedient.

<sup>18</sup> Inter alia, Moltmann, Boff, Schaeffer.





“environmental education”, so to speak. Therefore, one can conclude that RA's text still has relevance to Brazilian society and it is still a powerful critique to the absence of the issue of an environmental stewardship Brazilian Evangelical speech. The aforementioned concerns of Brazilian Neopentecostalism and also of the Protestants influenced by a Fundamentalist theology are the same of the period when *De excrementis diaboli* was written and published. What does this situation even worse is the fact that even to this day the aforementioned groups of Evangelicals in Brazil do not consider the importance of the theme of the caring of creation in their public discourses -and this gives a much greater relevance to RA's text.

More than twenty years ago RA was the very first theologian in Brazilian context – and perhaps in the whole world – to call the attention of his readers to this point: garbage is a problem, a social problem, a problem related to the places and spaces we live in. He was right in pointing to the fact that garbage is a social problem for a public theology and, consequently, for a public ethics – in one word, a public *theoethics*. It is impossible to stop the production of garbage. However, it is highly necessary to understand that recycling and reusing (and once again it can be said: in the North Atlantic life context the situation is better than the situation in Brazil) are part of the solution of the problem of garbage in our places and spaces of living.

As it was presented earlier in this text, RA showed three examples of Brazilian cities where he saw mountains of garbage scattered in the streets of those cities. But the sad truth is this: what RA described unfortunately can be seen in almost all Brazilian cities all over the entire country. There are exceptions, of course. But RA was right in stating that garbage can be an issue to be debated from an ethical and from a theological perspective. The stewardship of the environment everywhere must deal correctly with the problem of garbage. It is true that to see garbage scattered everywhere is a depressing scene. It is not difficult to understand why RA stated that garbage is the excrement of the devil in the world. RA was wise and bold to say that garbage is a problem for theologians as well, and not only for those politicians in charge of city administrations.

RA's text was/is an attempt to raise a consciousness of the necessity of correctly dealing with garbage in society. Two decades later, the challenge still faces us. A public *theoethics* in Brazil must take this problem very seriously. As a matter of fact, this is a global problem. After all, the *oikos* we live in is one and the same. The problem of one is ultimately the the problem of all as we inhabit a global village.

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