

## **The Church, the Environment and Ecotheology**

*Francis Ononuju Agba*

### **Abstract**

The ecological crisis has passed the stage of being merely a theory to a reality that has become a growing menace on a daily basis. Most often, these crises are referred to as natural disasters. Recent philosophical investigation, however, has shown that human activities have greatly contributed to these crises and so, time has come for the human race to ponder on how they have misused the divine command God gave them at creation. The absolute subjectivism in modern anthropology has immensely contributed to this abuse of God's gift of the natural resources. This is because the emphasis on reason and the consequent knowledge that comes from it as defining the person has led to humanity becoming slaves of science and technology. This undoubtedly has led to the sorry state of our environment and is also threatening the very existence of human beings. Unfortunately, humanity thinks that the solution to the crisis lies in more scientific discovery. There is need to look to religion to see how Christianity can contribute to the search for a solution to our ecological problems. This is because the best solution lies in attitudinal change and we believe that the Church, through ecotheology, can help educate people on the ethical implication of the divine command to subdue the earth and conquer it.

In his analysis of the ecological crisis that the world faces, John Paul II insists that, "there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and a progressive decline in the quality of life." (1989, 1) In his famous 1990 message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace which dwelt extensively on ecological issues, the

Pope argues that faced with widespread destruction of the environment, we cannot continue to relate with nature the way we are used to in the past. That John Paul II compares the ecological crisis of our contemporary society to another form of war should serve as a wake-up call for humanity to seek new ways of relating with the environment. This essay is an attempt to explore how this task could be adequately addressed with the introduction of an ecological theology into Church doctrines and school curriculum. The recent ecological happenings in Japan - earthquake, tsunami and the fear of nuclear radiation - which completely wiped out a city, justify the fears of the late Pope and show how urgent the need for ecotheology.

Human beings are part of the natural world, yet we find it almost impossible to think or talk about nature without separating ourselves from it (Seddon, 1997, pp. 7-14). By definition, ecology is the scientific study of the relation of living organisms with each other and their surroundings. Ecology is not synonymous with the environment but concerns itself more with the inter-relationship between all realities. While this definition is commonly associated with Ernst Haeckel, Eugenius Warming is referred to as the founder of ecology because he wrote the first significant textbook on the subject together with the first university course (Goodland, 1975).

On the other hand, ecotheology focuses on the inter-relationship between religion and nature, especially in the light of environmental concerns. The growing awareness of environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on human relationship with the earth. Ecotheology arose in response to widespread acknowledgement that an environmental crisis of immense proportions was threatening the future of human life on earth.

What does the study of world religions, especially Christianity, contribute to our understanding and stewardship of the environment? On this point, Hart (2006) notes that the focus on the heavenly afterlife is one of the factors that has historically limited Christian's relatedness to and care for the earth. "Striving to attain this future life in a separate, spiritual dimension reality",

he said, "takes precedence over present 'earthly' concerns, occupations, and preoccupations" (p. 34). This teaching is enhanced by the understanding or misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching on being "in the world and not of this world". Jesus declared that His kingdom is not of this world; based on these and other biblical texts, some Christian writers through the centuries declared that the followers of Jesus must also be in the world but not of the world.

The question of the Christian's relationship with nature becomes more important when considered from the perspective of the accusation by certain scholars that Christianity is responsible for the ecological crisis the world is facing now. Lynn White (1967, p. 206) was the first to throw this accusation against Christianity. The one-sided and anthropocentric emphasis of God's relationship with humanity by the Christian religion led him to conclude that Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt for the ecological crisis the world is presently going through.

In any theological consideration of ecology, therefore, the basic questions remain: what is the relationship between God and his creation; the relationship between humanity and other creatures. The question remains as to whether God is or is not concerned with the real world which surrounds us? Is God Creator or not? When the theology and preaching of the Church is limited to the themes of human redemption and justification with God, what is the place of God in our relationship with nature? In this sense, God is not concerned with what happens in the world or to other creatures. And so we must ask what sort of God is He who does everything for the salvation of the human person but clearly has nothing at all to do with human beings in their real life situation? What can be the meaning of salvation history which has nothing at all to do with real history? (Westermann, 1984, p. 120).

These questions invariably lead to the question of who we are. the human question. Schmitz (1993, p. 134) makes the point that the modern definition of the person, based on its extreme subjectivity, excludes all other realities and treats nature as the object of human knowledge.. He opines that the modern definition of the person sees the human being as the centre of all

reality who must determine how humanity relates to other realities. This contemporary anthropology has been influenced by the philosophies of scholars like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. However, the negative implication that this modern view of the person has for the human relationship with God and other creatures made John Paul II to describe it as an anthropological error responsible for our present day ecological crisis.

This erroneous definition of the person is based on an over emphasis on the material constitution of the person which exalts human consciousness and intellect without paying equal attention to the spiritual aspect of human definition. Ancient Greek philosophers, from whom Enlightenment thinkers borrowed, believed that reason had a transcendent 'foundation' either in nature (Aristotle) or in the realm of ideas (Socrates and Plato). This 'foundation' was made more explicit by medieval thinkers who asserted that it was God who provided the intellectual and moral grounding for reason. Such is the argument of Aquinas who, building on the Aristotelian formula, held that the spiritual and intellectual faculties of the human person find their source in God the Creator (Harvanek, 1993, p. 14). Aquinas, however, emphasised the metaphysical aspect of the human constitution without paying equal attention to the place of lived experience in this definition. In contrast, Descartes and Kant gave primacy to reason itself and so reason became self-grounding and self-justifying (John Paul II, 2005, pp. 8-9). Hence, human beings who possess the ability to reason become the only reality capable of determining what is right or wrong. Descartes, for example, argued that the cogito guarantees the human being that he/she exists (Varghese, 1999, p. 31). Such an argument is echoed by Kant whose anthropology is centred on an empirical and practical reflection on the human experience.

From this perspective, the person is seen purely in terms of human consciousness and senses. This view greatly influenced our understanding of human dominion over the earth. Descartes, for example, maintained that animals act automatically by the mechanistic system inherent in their nature with no conscious state or feeling. He left no one in doubt that humans are the

possessors of nature while the non-human world was a 'thing' and therefore possesses no interiority. Francis Bacon, like Descartes, based his argument on human knowledge and opined that, "a way must be opened for human understanding entirely different from any hitherto unknown and other helps provided, in order that the human mind may exercise over the nature of things the authority which properly belongs to it" (Bacon, 1960, pp. 3-4). Bacon identified three kinds of human ambition. The first of these human ambitions is those who desire to extend their power in their native country, which for him is a vulgar and degenerate kind. The second is of those who labor to extend the power of their country and its dominion among all people. This certainly has more dignity, though not less covetousness. But if one endeavors to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe, this ambition (if ambition it can be called) is without doubt both a wholesome and a nobler thing than the other two. Therefore, while in the first two grades, the human heart is wayward, in the third grade which concerns dominating the earth, the human heart is suddenly full of light and nobility. At the height of its triumph in the 20th century, it is obvious that this Baconian program has revealed its insufficiency in the lack of control over itself. The promised paradise has not been realized; instead the drama of our contemporary existence is that both humanity and the earth need protection because of the very magnitude of power that human beings have achieved (John Paul II, 2006, pp. 36-39).

Based on this modern understanding, human consciousness takes to the field of nature and to the external world to impose its own order and values on everything external to it. The human mind becomes the center of all meaning, value and reality and all other reality is judged by its self-assumed role of issuing credit to reality and this credit is issued in the currency of its own experience. Consequently, in the absence of any transcendent standard of truth, reason went from a discoverer of pre-existing truths to a creator of new ones. In the words of John Paul II, "in the field of scientific research, a positivistic mentality took hold which not only abandoned the Christian vision of the world, but more especially rejected every appeal to metaphysical or moral point of reference" (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 46). In contrast, he argues

that reason draws its truth and authority from the eternal law. In other words, human actions are not detected by consciousness alone but also by the will which moves such actions to obey the law of God.

It has been persistently argued that philosophy, theology and science speak of a harmonious universe, a cosmos. The task, however, is to bring all these disciplines to speak with one voice. This is the task of ecotheology. The task includes harmonizing the metaphysical and the immanent in the human question. In this way, the two aspects of human knowledge, the natural and the divine, are reconciled. This task, in the spirit of John Paul II, involves accepting the phenomenological and the metaphysical in the human constitution (Allen, 2003, p. 36). This erases the dichotomy and duality between these basic components of the human definition found in certain philosophies and theological thoughts. The essential element in fulfilling this task through the introduction of a distinctive discipline called "ecotheology" is the awareness it brings to the intrinsic relationship between God, humanity and other creatures. This is entirely a new method of doing theology (Harvanek, 1993, pp. 24-25), and this newness is what ecotheology brings to bear in theological thought. This newness pays particular attention to our relationship with nature and the need to take care of our environment.

The Church's teaching on ecological issues predates the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Popes Pius XII and Paul VI made various pronouncements on this. However, through the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, ecological issues and the role of the Church in this area were brought to the front burner of theological discourse. Many Bishop's conferences have also highlighted the need for education on ecological issues (Haffner, 2008, pp. 107-162). For Benedict XVI, the new solutions in dealing with environmental issues demands "a harmonious interdisciplinary whole, marked by unity and distinction" (Caritas in Veritate, nn. 31-32) This view echoes that of John Paul II who in the aforementioned message for World Day of Peace maintains that, "an education in ecological responsibility is urgent." He added that such education should be devoid of "moral sentiments or empty

wishes" but should be rooted in concrete action.

As laudable as this call by the magisterium is, the fact remains that it is time for the Church to move away from merely wishing for ecological education and to take concrete steps to actualize this wish. We should begin by introducing studies on ecological concerns in our seminaries and schools. Such courses should be treated as a distinctive discipline and should highlight the ethical implications of the way humanity uses the natural resources. Such studies would raise awareness that our commitment as Christians to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from our belief in God the Creator, and from our recognition of the effects of original and personal sin. By such studies our understanding of what is sinful would be renewed and broadened to include acts against nature rather than in limited terms of a person to person relationship. Thus, we shall come to understand that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. It becomes sinful for human beings to cause species to become extinct or to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation. Such acts against the natural world are a form of degradation of the earth's integrity, stripping the earth of its natural forests, destroying its wetlands, and contaminating its water, land, and air with poisonous substances. Such acts will be seen as sinful in an ecological theology.

Furthermore, ecotheology recognizes the historical relationship that exists among all creatures on the basis that they are all creatures of God the Creator. This calls for the care and responsible use of the world's resources, as implied in John Paul II's call for a new humanism, and places a burden of responsibility on the human person as a distinguished creature of God. In support of this view, Westermann (1984, p. 50) reasons that there was a time in the history of humankind when that which bound humans and beasts together was more clearly recognized than in later periods. He advised that it is important for human existence that we follow up on the realization of the wealthy sub-stratum of relationships that exists between us and beasts which has come to us as a result of recent anthropological and psychological knowledge, especially the results of the research into nature's behavior patterns.

Ecotheology highlights also the commonalities that exist among all creatures. For example, the blessing to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gn. 1:28) which was given to humans, was also given to the animals (Gn. 1:22). This blessing of the power of fertility belongs to all organic life however differently they may develop. And so, though different in kind, every creature shares this gift of God. This gift was given to all creatures that each may procreate according to their kind. Without it, the resources of the earth, that human beings so depend on, would have depleted. To further highlight this communal life of all creatures, the Bible presents us with instances where human sin or unfaithfulness has brought the wrath of God not only on humanity but on every creature (Gn. 6:5-7, Hosea 4:1) Where there was no human faithfulness to God's plan for creation, the land mourned, all who dwelt in it languished including the beasts, birds and fish. This is further highlighted by the covenant God made with Noah at the end of the flood because God entered into covenant not with humanity alone but with all creatures (Gn. 9: 9-10). Consequently, Jürgen Moltmann (1985, p. 186) argues that human beings should be seen as beings that can only exist in community with other created beings and which can only understand themselves in that community.

A proper understanding of humanity begins not with our special position in the cosmos or our likeness to God but with the complexes and milieu in which we appear and from which we live. A purely metaphysical, theological or anthropocentric approach to the human question, without including the cosmological approach, would most certainly not present a complete view of the human person. This harmonization is what ecotheology fulfills.

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