

# **Towards Achieving Environmental Justice and Ecological Harmony: A Theological Reflection**

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## **Abstract**

The ecological degradation brought upon our planet though human greed is to be recognised today as a moral and an ethical challenge to humanity which falls within the realm of social ethics. There is need today to move from an econocentric to an ecocentric worldview and to correct that 'anthropological error' on which today's ecological crisis can be blamed. A Christian theology of the environment is needed to counteract the excessively anthropocentric interpretations of the Creation story of Genesis which have justified humanity's irresponsible subjection, exploitation and manipulation of the rest of creation. The elements of creation have been seen as of no intrinsic value except in terms of their usefulness to humanity. Often forgotten is that human beings do not just live within the natural environment but we are part of that environment; we are a part of nature, depend on nature and are subject to the inscrutable laws of nature. Today ecological responsibility and ecological justice call us to repentance and conversion for the sins we have committed against natural creation. This demands a revision of certain presuppositions we have had regarding ourselves and the rest of our environment.

## **Introduction: The reality of ecological degradation**

The times are apocalyptic for our natural environment. There is an unprecedented climate change, global warming and ozone layer depletion, and this is happening at a very alarming rate. On account of the widespread abuse of the components of nature and the reckless destruction of plant and animal species that for millions of years ensured balance in the ecological make-up of the earth, we may be witnessing a radical mutation in individual species and in the constitution of the entire planetary system.

The human race, and along with us our animate and inanimate neighbours, are today face to face with a multiple ecological challenge. From the rapid deforestation and desert encroachment in the countries of the Sahel Region, to the seasonal floods, cyclones and tsunamis in the low-lying South East Asian countries; from the speedy disappearance of the tropical forests of Africa to the sudden recession of the rich Brazilian Amazon vegetation; and from the melting glaciers and ice surfaces of the Polar Regions to the rise in general sea levels across the globe, it is a gory tale of ecological degradation brought upon planet earth by human misadventure.

While the correct statistics may continue to be a subject of controversy among the experts, and while there may be divergent opinions on the ways out of the present predicament, the reality of an ongoing ecological disaster, as such, has now been accepted as a matter of fact among the generality of people in the 21st Century. We do not need a microscope to verify the damage being done to the environment by the perennial gas flaring in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. We do not need environmental experts to tell us of the devastating effects of the massive pollution (of carbon dioxide), oozing out of the over-crowded cities of our developing countries. We do not have to be Bio-Chemists or Micro-Biologists to know something of the terrible harm being done to our water resources and delicate aquatic life by the frequent spillage of fossil fuels into rivers and ponds. And yes, we do not require the services of Geologists and Toxicologists before we know something of the impending danger in the practice of dumping toxic wastes in such developing countries as Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire.

True, climate change, ecological degradation, and the depletion of non-renewable resources, which are already affecting the quality of life of the poor around the world, and may make life on our planet impossible for future generations of human beings, and of species of plants and animals, have been caused by human activity a result of the lifestyle choices of human beings. They are therefore to be recognised as a moral and an ethical challenge for humanity. For Christians, this matter falls squarely in the realm of social ethics. We must respond adequately to this great moral and ethical challenge of our time, beginning with a Christian Theology of the Environment.

## **Biblical theology to blame?**

At about the onset of the new ecological awareness some forty years ago, some writers had laid the blame for today's widespread ecological degradation at the footstep of Judeo-Christian theology. This was on account of what they saw as an excessively anthropocentric worldview that is allegedly hinged on the passage of Genesis 1:26-28 on the one hand, and on the other hand on account of certain extremes in Christian asceticism whereby matter or the material world was thoroughly denigrated, when not taken altogether as evil and opposed to the Spirit. (See Lynn White Jr., 1967, 1203-1207).

A cross-section of Scripture scholars from a wide spectrum of Christian traditions today however reject such blame, and instead maintain that the Judeo Christian Scripture is decidedly theo-centric, and so any evidences of a strong anthropocentrism among Christian scholars and functionaries through the ages, are the result of an unfortunate misreading of the Genesis text, and not the intent of the sacred writers. Also, they maintain that the unhealthy denigration of matter (when evident in Christian thought and among certain extreme Ascetics) can hardly be traced to ancient Hebrew Religion, and least of all to the New Testament as such would contradict the core Christian doctrine of the Incarnation by which Christ sanctified not only humanity, but all of creation. Instead the denigration of the flesh and natural creation among categories of Christian Ascetics is perhaps a result of influences from Greek Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, or the Oriental influences of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism whose worldview often made them devalue matter and the material world. (See Paulos Mar Gregorios, 1987, page 10).

Psalm 24 declares that the Lord's is the earth and the fullness thereof. The earth belongs to the Lord and the Lord alone. It does not belong to any other god, whether mythological or scientific, political or economic. It does not belong to any individual human beings, or to any powerful nations, or even to the whole of the human race. The earth belongs to the Lord alone, the One "who founded it on the seas and established it over the waters." This brief statement of Psalm 24 stands on a rich and elaborate religious tradition that stretches from Genesis to Revelations, a tradition that has inspired many Christian saints, mystics, poets and

scholars in the last two thousand years.

Yet we must admit that there has been a commonly held misconception of humanity's dominion over the rest of creation, which as we noted earlier springs from a particular misrepresentation of the first Genesis account of creation, where the first man and woman were told to "subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish, the birds and every living thing" (Gn. 1:26-28). By the unfortunate misinterpretation of this text, human beings were thought not only to be superior to all the rest of creation, but to have the right to use and manipulate other elements of creation as they please. More critically, by the skewed interpretation of the above text, the value of the rest of creation was thought to lie purely in their usefulness to humankind. In this way they were denied any intrinsic value and integrity of their own.

### **The Bible: A Theocentric worldview**

A growing number of biblical scholars today however agree that the above interpretation is far from what the sacred writers wanted to communicate. A critical reading of the Bible indicates that the principal value of the natural creation lies so much more in the fact that it comes from God than in its usefulness to human beings. (See Genesis 2-3; Genesis 9; Job 38-41; Psalm 104; Psalm 148 and Eccl 3:1-9). Psalm 104 and Psalm 148 reflect the biblical worldview that the elements of creation are good and beautiful in themselves, and in their individual majesty, grandeur and splendour, they reveal God and proclaim God's glory. St. Francis of Assisi is one of the Christian Mystics who demonstrated a keen understanding of this biblical theology of the environment, as reflected in the classic "Canticle of Brother Sun" as follows:

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the

heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.

Yet, in much of Western philosophical (and theological) traditions, human beings have been reluctant to consider themselves as part of nature. We have often preferred a dualism that separates humanity from the rest of creation which came to be seen as mere objects. Upon this dualistic worldview, scientists and technologists got into the framework of stepping aside from the rest of nature, and then they objectify, analyse, manipulate and attempt to control them. This approach tended to sever or dislocate humankind from the material context that gives it life and meaning, and it is responsible in reasonable measure for the current lack of harmony, the current disruption in planet earth's natural equilibrium, the current ecological crisis.

But in truth we humans do not merely live within the natural environment as people live within a building. We are part of the living blocks that constitute the framework of creation. We are not

disinterested observers of the web of nature. We are strands within this web. We are not bystanders that are able to watch as the mystery of natural life unfolds. We are participants in the wondrous workings of nature. We may be a unique dimension of the natural world, but we are not separate from it. We are part of nature, and nature is part of us. We may be able to discover the laws and the order of nature. But we are still subject to nature's inscrutable laws and mysterious order. As Dianne Bergant says,

We are truly children of the universe, made of the same stuff as are the mountains and the rain, the sand and the stars. We are governed by the laws of life and growth and death as are the birds and the fish and the grass of the field. We thrive in the warmth of and through the agency of the sun as does every other living thing. We come from the earth as from a mother, and we are nourished from this same source of life. (Dianne Bergant, 1987, 28)

The Bible is very clear on the point that the earth and all that fills it belongs to God and no one else. Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, and charged with certain royal responsibilities over creation. As representatives of God, caretakers, conservators, custodians, guardians, stewards and “advocates” for planet earth, they were to exercise some form of rule over creation. But in the discharge of these responsibilities, they were supposed to be fully accountable to God. They were certainly not meant to be autonomous in their governance or stewardship over a territory that belongs to God alone.

### **Human greed and acquisitiveness, cause of ecological crisis**

The real roots of today's violent assault on the physical environment are not to be found in any objective reading of the Scriptures of the Judeo-Christian religion, or any authentic Christian spirituality. Rather, they can be traced to human greed and acquisitiveness that is almost always accompanied by aggressive attacks and destructive manipulation. It was human greed and acquisitiveness, sustained by a narrowly “econocentric worldview” that largely propelled the political expansionism, world trade - including the merciless transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and the post-colonial capitalist imperialism that held sway across the world in the last five hundred years.

Pope John Paul II blames today's ecological crisis on what he calls "an anthropological error" that is unfortunately widespread in our day. He says, "in his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way...thus provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him." (John Paul II, 1991, n. 76). Human greed and acquisitiveness are indeed largely responsible for the ruthless conquest of the world's indigenous populations, and the reckless exploitation of the rich natural resources in their domain. More and more of these resources were needed to sustain the rapidly industrialising cities of the world, and to further advance the scientific and technological civilisation. The new civilisation has certainly made life easier for many. With the new civilisation, human life has been enriched and human dignity has been enhanced. But these have often been at a very high cost to both our human and non-human 'room-mates' in the one planetary household: the poorer populations of the world have been rendered helpless victims of the exploitative systems in place, while the natural environment has been so massively degraded that all present and future life species are now rendered perilous.

The new habits of consumption that accompanied the scientific revolution and technological growth, obtained as they are at the expense of the basic rights of the poor of today and future generations, and at the expense of a wholesome and integral ecological system, can in our day no longer be sustained for the ever growing number of species. We now recognise that the natural environment may be able to endure a certain amount of imbalance, but that when its threshold of equilibrium is passed, it may no longer sustain human life or any kind of life for that matter. (Dianne Bergant, 1998: 10).

### **Ecoharmony: The challenge of a new cosmology and spirituality**

Ecoharmony raises the question of ecojustice. The challenge that faces us is no longer just a question of sustainability and human viability on planet earth, but that of justice to the rest of creation which are endowed with intrinsic value like ourselves. All creatures have value in and for themselves, for one another, and for God. They are interconnected in a diverse whole that itself has unique value for God. Benedict XVI observes that for true peace to reign on earth, humanity must be

increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. He declares that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence and vice versa. Thus he says, "There is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men [sic.]. Both of these presuppose peace with God." Elsewhere the Pope speaks of the need to strengthen the covenant between human beings and the environment - a covenant which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying. (See Benedict XVI, January 1, 2007, n.8 and Benedict XVI, January 2008, n.7. See also Charles Birch et al, 1990, 290).

People of other philosophical traditions besides the Western had always understood that human beings are not the measure of all things; that the rest of creation are not there as objects simply meant to serve our needs. This is why they often had a more harmonious and less aggressive relationship with the rest of the created order, even though such harmonious and benign relationship was mistaken for weakness and exploited by the champions of Western ideological, political and economic expansionism.

Today however, ecojustice calls for a new ethical perspective that is based on a new ontology and a new cosmology, one that goes beyond seeing the rest of creation as simply possessing instrumental value. And since a people's theology is often closely related to their cosmology, there might be need for a critical re-examination of our traditional Christian theology and spirituality, especially in the West, to rid them of any traces of extreme anthropocentrism which, as we noted above, has contributed immensely to the destructive attitudes and behaviours that have led to today's ecological crisis.

Furthermore, since liturgical celebrations are a major forum for catechesis and their very performance is often in itself catechetical, perhaps the times call for a review and an enrichment of some of the prayers and songs we use in our liturgy to create greater awareness of and deepen sensitivity to the splendour of the natural creation whose very existence and integrity reveals and glorifies the Creator. To enhance eco-sensitivity among Christians, perhaps we should begin to emphasise more seriously the sacramental role, but also the mystery and integrity of the natural elements we use in Christian liturgical and paraliturgical celebrations - water, bread and wine, oil, fire, light, colours, the

smell of incense and wax, as well as the dynamics of the liturgical cycles, including 'hours', 'days'; and 'seasons'.

### **A new dawn of ecological justice and ecological responsibility**

Although the ecological scenario created by human neglect and abuse looks quite bleak, Christians by virtue of their faith in the resurrection, must continue to be harbingers of hope for the renewal of the whole of creation, which as St. Paul observes has been waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed. He says, the entire creation has until now been groaning in endless travail, waiting for liberation from its slavery to decay. (See Romans 8:19-23). Prophet Ezekiel had the vision of dry bones – a symbol of death and destruction. But with the breath of the Spirit of God, these dry bones came back to life and they became a powerful and an immense army. (Ezekiel 37:1-10). Isaiah prophesied that the Spirit of God would “turn the wilderness into a fruitful field,” that “the parched ground would be watered,” and that a new paradise would be created, one that would encompass the entire world in peace. Isaiah's prophecy also includes the promise of “new heavens and a new earth” (See Isaiah 32:15; Isaiah 61:1-4; Isaiah 41:17-20; Isaiah 65:17-25 and Isaiah 66:22, and 2 Peter 3:13). In the book of Revelations the Seer says,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... And the one who sat on the throne said, “Behold I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:1,5).

It was science and technology that gave us the powers to do great damage to creation. Eventually, a new type of science and technology will enable us to repair the damage. There are rays of light on the horizon, raising hopes for a new day of ecological responsibility and ecological justice. The new day will call us to repentance and conversion for the sins we have committed against natural creation, and lead us in a process of transformation of heart and mind which will involve the adjustment of some fundamental presuppositions we have had regarding ourselves and our environment. In this process:

1. We must recognise that the universe is a communion of subjects, with each one and the whole having intrinsic value, rather than a collection of objects which have only instrumental value.

2. We must recognise that the earth is a single reality that cannot function properly in fragments, but only in totality.
3. We must recognise the primary status of the earth. Human beings are derivative. We depend upon the earth for our existence. The earth does not depend upon us for its existence as such.
4. We must recognise that by virtue of the enormous intellectual gifts bestowed upon us as human beings, we are now involved in almost everything that happens to the natural creation. We must therefore exercise utmost responsibility and caution in the application of such intelligence in relation to the rest of the created order.
5. We must recognise that the core virtues that characterise authentic Christian life cannot be limited to the merely personal and social. They must now be extended to the ecological as well.
6. We must now develop a new set of ethical-moral principles as well as legal-political instruments that recognise the gravity of all acts of commission and omission that could be classified under “biocide” and “geocide,” for if we continue to kill life forms, we will eventually kill the earth itself! (See Thomas Berry, 1991, 93-103).

To achieve a good measure of environmental justice and ecological harmony, the following virtues must also be cultivated by all who are committed to the survival of planet earth:

- i. The virtue of sustainability. We must learn to live within the regenerative, absorptive and carrying capacities of the earth. This virtue in turn calls for adaptability and frugality. We must abandon the habit of excessive production and consumerism, and learn to live simply, so that others may simply live. Others here include the poor of today and tomorrow, as well as the elements of creation whose existence and integrity are today threatened by our excessive consumption patterns.
- ii. The virtue of solidarity. We must live with an abiding consciousness that everything is connected to everything else, and they are mutually interdependent. Thus we must develop the virtue of solidarity with not only other people, but also other species and

other elements of creation. This virtue will dispose us to respect biodiversity.

- iii. The virtue of humility. We need the virtue of humility to recognise quickly enough the limitations of human knowledge, human technological ingenuity, and human morality. This virtue will help tame our propensity to control and manipulate nature, to exaggerate our authority over other creatures, or to undervalue the rest of creation. (See James Nash, 1991, page 66-67)

## **Conclusion**

Christians have been commissioned by the Lord Jesus to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” (Matthew 5:13-14). We are to preserve the earth from decay by the message of truth and redemption which we possess. We are to shine out the Light of Easter before the men and women of our generation who would otherwise be groping in the darkness of violence and destruction. We have been sent out to teach the world about the beauty and integrity of each and every creature of God, and the dignity and sanctity of the whole of creation. We have been empowered to overcome evil in the world by the force of good, and to replace death with life.

As Christians we are constantly challenged by the Gospel to cooperate with the Spirit of God who makes all things new, in order to remedy the disorder within our own personal lives, to rectify the injustice within the human society, and to reverse the ecological devastation of our world. As true stewards of God's household, we must take responsibility for what happens to present and future generations of human beings and to the entire creation by advocating for a new environmental ethic and politics in our individual societies, and across the world.

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