

UNDERSTANDING ECOTHEOLOGY: TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC DOMINION THEOLOGY

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Abstract

As part of creation, it is incumbent on man to care for the earth even as the earth cares for man by providing a habitat and every raw material man needs to make man's temporal existence as comfortable as possible. If man takes care of the earth, the earth will take care of man. The task of educating people about this does not rest on the sciences alone. Religion has a role to play. This work on ecotheology seeks a reorientation on the true meaning of dominion theology. It begins with an introduction. It discusses ecotheology and then the problem of dominion theology and presents the authentic Christian meaning according to God's plan. To enrich our discussion, excerpts from other churches and religions are obtained. The need for ecotheology is once again re-established. Finally, recommendations are made and the work is concluded.

Keywords: Creation, dominion theology, ecology, ecotheology, stewardship.

Introduction

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "Scripture and Tradition never cease to teach and celebrate this fundamental truth: The world was made for the glory of God...for God has no other reason in creating than his love and goodness".¹ It is against this backdrop that we can firmly say that the current ecological problems are in total conflict with God's plan for creation which, *ab initio*, He found very good. Our era is one plagued with ecological disasters, of which human actions and inactions are highly culpable. Accusations have been made against the Church as a promoter of dominion theology. For

¹ CCC 293.

many of such thinkers, including the renowned Lynn White, the Genesis 1:28 injunction to conquer and subdue the earth is a recurring argument. However, some papal statements have given impetus to these arguments. The most popular among them being the bull of Pope Nicholas VI, *Romanus Pontifex*, in which he promised rule over the earth to the Portuguese monarchs and the bull of Pope Alexander VI, *Inter Coetera*, in which he grants power to the monarchs of Castile and Leon over islands and mainlands.² This work is aimed at encouraging the development of ecotheology that will reorient the minds of believers towards the true idea of dominion theology.

What is Ecotheology?

‘Eco-theology’ is a combination of two English words, ‘ecology’ and ‘theology’. It is defined as the “Theological explorations of the connections between religion and the environment, especially with regard to environmental concerns”.³ It is a form of constructive theology centered on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. Eco-theology begins from the premise that a relationship exists between human religious or spiritual worldviews and the degradation and preservation of nature. Thus, it explores the interaction between ecological values such as sustainability and the human domination of the natural world. It is important to note that eco-theology explores not only the relationship between religion and nature in terms of degradation of nature, but also in terms of ecosystem management in general. Specifically, eco-theology seeks not only to identify prominent issues within the relationship between nature and religion, but also to outline potential solutions. This is of particular importance because many supporters and contributors of eco-theology argue that science and education are simply not enough to inspire the change necessary in our current environmental crisis.⁴

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is considered to be a pioneering figure in the field of eco-theology, and was among the early thinkers to draw attention to the spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis. He first presented his insight in a 1965 essay, expanding it in a series of lectures given at the University of Chicago. Nasr’s lectures were later published as “Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man” in 1968 in which he argued, in a detailed manner, for the revival of a sacred view of the universe in order to combat the contemporary environmental crisis.⁵ Anna M. Gade states that the short and often credited

² Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997. 70.

³ “Ecotheology” accessed January 10, 2023, en.m.wiktionary.org

⁴ Watling, Tony. *Ecological imaginations in the world religions: an ethnographic analysis* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishers) 2009

⁵ Sayem, Md. Abu. “seyyedhossein Nasr’s works on environmental issues: a survey”, (Islamic studies. 2019) 58

article by Lynn White contained similar arguments made by Nasr in his influential Rockefeller Series Lectures at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Richard Foltz is also of the view that Nasr's Lectures that preceded White's 1967 article presented similar argument. Foltz argues that Nasr has made the connection between the West's spiritual and environmental crises since the 1950s and actually anticipated White's critique in his own lectures given at the University of Chicago earlier in the same year as White's address. Nasr is credited for making "significant methodological and theoretical contributions to the development of eco-theology".⁶

The relationship of theology to the modern ecological crisis, however, became an intense issue of debate in Western academia in 1967, following the publication of the article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", by Lynn White Jr., Professor of History at the University of California at Los Angeles. In this work, White puts forward a theory that the Christian model of human dominion over nature has led to environmental devastation, providing a voice for "The Ecological Complaint".⁷ In 1973, theologian Jack Rogers published an article in which he surveyed the published studies of approximately twelve theologians which had appeared since White's article. They reflect the search for "an appropriate theological model" which adequately assesses the biblical data regarding the relationship between God, humans, and nature."

Why Ecotheology?

Some scholars argue that Christians actually helped bring about the current global environmental crisis by instructing followers that God, and by extension mankind, transcends nature. Much of the development of eco-theology as a theological discourse was in response to this argument, which has been called "The Ecological Complaint". Defendants of this perspective essentially claim that Christianity promotes the idea of human dominion over nature, treating nature itself as a tool to be used and even exploited for survival and prosperity.⁸

However, Christianity has often been viewed as the source of positive values towards the environment, and there are many voices within the Christian tradition whose vision embraces the well-being of the earth and all creatures. While Francis of Assisi is one of the more obvious influences on Christian eco-theology, there are many theologians and

⁶Gade, M. Anna. "Muslim environmentalism as religious practice: accounts of the unseen" (Columbia university press 2019) 207

⁷Hoel, Nina, transforming feminisms: religion, women and ecology (Journal for the study of religion 2011) 24

⁸Cengage, Gale. "Ecotheology". Encyclopedia of science and religion. Retrieved 23 November 2022

teachers, such as Isaac of Nineveh and Seraphim of Sarov, whose work has profound implications for Christian thinkers.

Christian Perspectives on Ecotheology

The concept of environmental stewardship originates first and foremost from creation stories, in which God gives humans dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land (cf. Gen 1:28) and the command in Gen 2:15 to “cultivate and care” for the land. These bible passages reveal God as creator and owner of the universe but in his benevolence has given the human beings the privilege to utilize all he has created for their own good. Still, the passages teach that each individual has a vitally important role to play as a steward in God’s domain. This stewardship includes both proper use and conservation of natural and human resources in a way that brings glory to God and furthers his purpose in the world. Therefore, the earth is a gift from God the creator to human beings to till and to keep. This is a divine mandate which calls the human persons to be stewards of creation and not the owners.

Stewardship is a term that refers to the responsibility of a steward to manage wisely the goods and property of another. A steward is, therefore, not an owner, but one who has a responsibility to an owner to treat property with care and respect. Stewardship has come to be used in the Christian theology in a broader sense emphasizing both our personal and collective responsibility to care wisely for God’s creation. The assumption is that human beings do not really possess or own anything; rather the whole world, including human beings belongs to God. In view of this, Bugg defines stewardship as “utilizing and managing all resources God provides, for the glory of God and betterment of his creation”⁹ Hence, stewardship begins and ends with the understanding of God’s ownership of all; for “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). Therefore, human beings are not owners but stewards of all that comes into their arena of responsibility – income, assets, property, goods, time, talents, and their very selves.

The divine mandate to till and keep the earth (cf. Gen 2:15) aims at achieving ecological balance. It charges humans with a two-tier responsibility: on the one hand, human beings have the responsibility to produce things in cooperation with nature; and, on the other hand, they have a great responsibility of maintaining the world with its ecological balance. Consequently, ecological balance is not only to protect nature, but also to sustain it.¹⁰

⁹Bugg, C. “Stewardship” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Tennessee: Holman, 2001. 1303.

¹⁰Alangaram, A. “Ecological Concerns in Christian Traditions”, in *Asian Horizons*. 709-723

Little wonder the whole world today talks about sustainability development which has to do with one's moral obligation to future generations with respect to the environment.

The Problem of Dominion Theology

Unfortunately, the contemporary world has deviated from the real meaning of dominion as a responsibility to mean selfish use and abuse of the resources of the earth. Many people base their argument of the misuse of the earthly goods on the dominion and domination of Gen 1:28-29 with the claim that God has given human beings authority over the created world to subdue it. However, John Paul II points out that the distorted notion of human dominion can be attributed to self-interest and greed of the human person wanting excessive acquisition of material things at the expense of the world's natural wealth. This distorted notion is also influenced by the rise of scientific research and technological advancement.¹¹ Information technology, biotechnology, nuclear energy, industrialization and many other abilities have given the human person an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world.¹²

The consequence of this is the disruption of the original harmony that should exist between humanity and nature with its resultant ecological crisis such as: deforestation, pollution, etc. this has led to devastation of the environment. Prophet Hosea laments "therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away" (Hosea, 4:3). A proper understanding of dominion shows that human beings are to respect nature as God's creation, the ecological crisis brought about through the misuse and abuse of creation, the Christian understanding of dominion and domination.

This attitude towards the earth is often caused by anthropocentrism. Today the human being is accused of being the Satan of the Earth. This stems from the fact that in contemporary societies human beings have made themselves the center of everything and aim at a *dominium terrae* crushing everything that stands in their path to actualize their aims. This dominion theology is even recognized by some Popes such as Nichola VI (1447-1455) in his bull *Romanus Pontifex* in which he promises rule over the earth the Portuguese monarchs and Alexander VI (1492-1503) in his bull *Inter Coetera* in which he grants similar powers to the monarchs of Castile and Leon. Boff finally traces the problem to androcentrism, because for him it is the male rather than the female who proclaims himself lord over everything in nature including the woman.¹³

¹¹ John Paul II, encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican city. 15

¹² Pope Francis, encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*, on care for our common home., Nairobi: St Paul's Publications. 105.

¹³ Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997. 70.

God's Plan for Creation

The foundation of the discussion on ecological issues is the fact that creation is a gift from God to humanity, to till and subdue (cf. Gen 2:15). The earth was given to human beings by God the creator to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. The creation story shows that the creator looked upon his creation and “saw that it was good” (Gen 1:4; 1:10; 1:12; 1:18; 1:21; 1:25). It also reveals to us that not only is everything God created good, but also that creation itself reflects the magnificence of God. The psalmist eloquently describes a profound experience of God's creative power and a sense of the awesome responsibility of the human creature thus:

When I see the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged, what is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god, with glory and honor you crowned him, gave him power over the works of your hand, put all things under his feet. All of them, sheep and cattle, yes, even the savage beasts, birds of the air, and fish that make their way through the waters (Psalm 8:3-8).

Nevertheless, it is God's creation of humankind that completes the created order in such a way that he pronounces it to be “very good” (cf. Gen 1:31) being created in his own image and likeness. Created in the image of God and being placed in the midst of God's creation, God sets human being apart for himself and gives them a special responsibility and authority. He is given the authority and task to ‘represent’ God in creation so that God continues to sustain his creation in the best possible manner by giving him intelligence and creativity to do so”.¹⁴ This is explicit in the words of Moltmann when he refers to human beings as a ‘proxy’ of God. He writes, “As God's image, human beings are God's proxy in his creation, and represent him. As God's image, human beings are for God himself a counterpart, in whom he desires to see himself as if in a mirror”.¹⁵

In the same vein, the Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly states: “Man is the summit of the creator's work, as the inspired account expresses by clearly distinguishing the creation of man from that of other creatures”.¹⁶ As the summit of God's creation, man reflects God in a most excellent way, and as the image of God, human beings have the capacity for reason, which enables them to know God, the world, and themselves. They are also endowed with the powers of freedom and imagination that allow them to reflect upon their experiences, choose a course of action, and thus become co-creators with God.

¹⁴ Hefner, P. “Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-creator”, in T Peters, (ed.) *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, New York: Oxford, 1998. 184.

¹⁵ Moltmann, J. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London: SCM Press.188.

¹⁶ Fern, R. *Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 383.

This privilege bestows on them a dignity that surpasses other creatures precisely because they can participate spiritually in God's creativity in a manner that far exceeds the merely physical capabilities of other creatures.

It follows, then, that with such capabilities, and by virtue of human dignity, God placed human beings in governance over his creation: "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (cf. 1:26). This dominion was specified as a command to "till and keep" the garden (cf. 2:15). By the command of the Lord to till and keep the garden, it can be assumed that human beings were commanded to use their rationality in the governance of creation for the sake of bringing forth fruit from the earth and to be responsible for its continuity. The earth is essentially a shared inheritance whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. This shows that God's plan for creation is to provide human beings with the means for sustaining and enhancing their existence. However, for the earth to be of benefit to humanity, the human person will have to take good care of it. In order to discharge this responsibility properly as good stewards, a clear understanding of what dominion means is essential.

Christian Understanding of 'Dominion and 'Domination'

In his analysis of the book of Genesis, Westermann points out that the Hebrew verbs used in Gen 1:28 for 'subduing' the earth and having 'dominion' over other creatures are *kabash* and *radah* respectively. These mean bringing the earth under the control of human being because the Hebrew verb *Kabash* literally means to tread down' or bring into bondage; and *radah* would mean to trample or to prevail against. Hence, the human persons are given a mandate by God to exercise some kind of 'sovereignty' over the rest of creation. He explains further that the verbs used in Gen 1:28 are used particularly in terms of kingly rule and his exercise of dominion. Thus, that alone would not give way for a whimsical way of exercising dominion, bringing harm to whatever is placed under one's rule. In addition, Westermann writes that, "according to ancient view, however, there is no suggestion of exploitation; on the contrary, the king is personally responsible for the well-being and prosperity of those he rules. His rule serves the well-being of his subjects.¹⁷ Therefore 'ruling over' would mean taking care and providing for the welfare and prosperity of that which is placed under, and anyway of selfish exploitation or abuse would result in the loss of kingly power.

Christian interpretation of the Genesis account, then, does not suggest any exploitation or domineering and destructive action on the part of the human person; rather, the mandate to 'till' and 'keep' implies that the human person should cultivate, plough and work the

¹⁷Westermann, C. *Genesis: A Practical Commentary. Text and Interpretation*, New York: T&T Clark. 159.

land, while to 'keep would mean to care, protect, oversee and preserve the earth. It means to take responsibility for"; to govern the world with justice. In other words, the human person endowed with intelligence must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibrium existing between him/her and other created things.

The mandate "to serve and to preserve" the land places human beings not in a hierarchical position over creation but in a position of service to it. While all things have been subordinated to human beings, we should rule over them as God Himself does. This dominion does not grant to human beings the right to "lord over" creation in a manner inappropriate with God's own manner of governance. Human dominion does not present man as a despotic ruler. This portrayal puts human beings squarely in a caretaker position in regard to environmental stewardship. Thus, John Paul II points out that:

The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to "use and misuse, or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree" (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural World, We are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity. A true concept of development cannot ignore the use of the elements of nature, the renewability or resources and the consequences of haphazard industrialization - three considerations which alert our consciences to the moral dimension of development"¹⁸

Consequently, the Christian understanding of dominion also shows human beings as co-creators with God through the care of His creation. Dominion does not mean that the natural world should be seen as resources to be exploited. It is rather, a reality to be respected and even revered as a gift from God. As a result, dominion requires responsible stewardship. The understanding of dominion as a humble submission to the will of God explains why John Paul II maintains that the relationship between humanity, nature and God could best be served through the concept of 'stewardship'.¹⁹ Such stewardship must uphold the common good of humanity, while also respecting the end for which each creature was intended, and the means necessary to achieve that end. Disordered human actions, which harm creation, and by extension, human life and property directly threaten the right to life, to health, to development, to housing, to work,

¹⁸ John Paul II. Encyclical letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, on social concern, Nairobi: Paulines 2005. 36.

¹⁹ John Paul II. Encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, Nairobi: Paulines Publication. 1995. 22

to culture and the rights of indigenous people.²⁰ therefore, irresponsible consumption, degradation and depletion of natural resources have a huge impact on human life.

The exact understanding of dominion helps to see creation as a gift and also promotes love in stewardship as against irresponsible use of nature. For John Paul II, this fundamental truth requires that natural resources be considered as gifts that have potentials to enrich human life and should be developed, not manipulated. Thus, dominion empowers human beings to acknowledge the truth about creation and to give thanks for the gift.²¹ This is why dominion implies vocation which consists in stewardship. The command of dominion and domination, therefore, is an obligation to look after God's work responsibly on his behalf and to ensure through our participation in the well-being of creation. When the human person obeys the injunction to till and care for the earth, he/she reaps a bounty harvest from the thereby, exhibiting the mutual responsibility in the relationship between the human person and nature.²² The misunderstanding of dominion engenders ecological crisis that we experience today.

Ecumenical Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship

It is necessary at this point to get some insights from other Christian churches as well as non-Christian religions on environmental stewardship. This will help to enrich our discourse on ecotheology.

Anglicans

Anglicans worldwide have long been concerned with environmental issues. In 2015, Anglican Bishops from across the globe met in South Africa, after which they released a statement on the environment published on Good Friday 2015 themed “The World is Our Host: A Call to Urgent Action for Climate Justice”. Also, guided by the Fifth Mark of Mission, members of the Anglican Communion Environment Network strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth. In April 2016, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby met with fifty young Anglicans from across southern Africa to discuss the environment and discipleship at a youth conference in Lusaka ahead of the Anglican Consultative Council meeting.²³

²⁰Chryssavgis, J. *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, New York: Fordham University Press 2012.573.

²¹ John Paul II. Encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, Nairobi: Paulines Publication. 10.

²²Oso, F. A. “*Ecology and Social Teaching of the Church*” in Ijezie I. E. (ed.) *Theology and Ecological Issues*, Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publication, 224-239

²³ Ibe, Julian C. *The Church and Ecological Concerns in the Light of Laudato Si' 211: A Study In Zaria Diocese, Nigeria*, a Master's thesis presented to the University of Calabar Nigeria, June 2017. 74.

Episcopalians

In 1995 the Episcopal Church established a new arm of their executive body called Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. In their theological statement on creation they asserted

Our church has begun to live into the call of the World Council of Churches 1991 Convocation on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation “for building a culture that lives in harmony with Creation’s integrity.” We are deepening our biblical understanding and perspective with regard to Creation and our relationship to the wisdom of the ages. However, the liturgy of the Episcopal Church must come to reflect and teach our interconnection to God through loving relationships with all things. In Romans 1:20, it is declared that the invisible things of God, even in his eternal power and Godhead, can be clearly seen and understood in Creation.²⁴

Islam

The most elaborate perspectives from other religions are from Islam. This is because, Islam, together with Christianity, are the two most populous religions in Nigeria. In Islam, Muslims believe the earth is part of Allah’s creation. Their holy book states as follows:

Allah is He Who raised up the heavens without any pillars that you can see. Then He settled Himself on the Throne, and constrained the sun and the moon to serve you; each planet pursues its course during an appointed term. He regulates it all and expounds the Signs, that you may have firm belief in the meeting with your Lord. He it is who spread out the earth and made therein firmly fixed mountains and rivers, and of fruits of every kind He has made pairs. He causes the night to cover the day (Surah 13:3-4).

However, although human beings are seen as the most intelligent form of life on earth, they are also responsible for almost all the damage done to the planet. According to the Qur’an, Allah (God) is the Creator of the world. Human beings are in the world as trustees or vice-regents, to look after the world for Allah and for the future. As recorded in the Hadith:

The Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been created a place of worship, pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is love on his part.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid 75

²⁵ Ibid 76.

In the Qur'an, Muslims are instructed to care for the environment, not to damage it. This is stated as follows: "Devote thyself single-mindedly to the Faith, and thus follow the nature designed by Allah, the nature according to which He has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah." (*Surah 30:30*).

The Qur'anic account of creation is in line with modern scientific thought about the development of the universe and life on earth. Muslims acknowledge that life developed over a long period of time, but see Allah's power behind it all. Descriptions of creation in the Qur'an are set in context to remind the readers of Allah's majesty and wisdom. "What is the matter with you, that you are not conscious of Allah's majesty, seeing that it is He Who has created you in diverse stages? See you not how Allah has created the seven heavens one above another, and made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun as a (glorious) lamp? And Allah has produced you from the earth, growing (gradually)" (71:13-17).²⁶

While Islam recognizes the general idea of the development of life in stages, over a period of time, human beings are considered as a special act of creation. Islam teaches that human beings are a unique life form that was created by Allah in a special way, with unique gifts and abilities unlike any other: a soul and conscience, knowledge, and free will. The Qur'an describes how Allah created Adam: "We created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape..." (15:26). And, "He began the creation of man from clay, and made his progeny from a quintessence of fluid" (32:7-8). Thus, human beings have a fundamental attachment to the earth. While the creation of Eve is not described in detail, the Qur'an does make it clear that a "mate" was created with Adam, from the same nature and soul. "It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her in love" (7:189).²⁷ She is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, but in Islamic tradition she is known as "Hawwa" (Eve). From these two individuals, generations of human beings have inhabited the earth. "Oh humankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored among you in the sight of Allah is the one who is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)" (49:13).²⁸

²⁶ Johnston, David L. "Intra-Muslim Debates on Ecology: is Shari'a still Relevant?" (2012) 218-238. Accessed January 10, 2023. www.jstor.org.

²⁷ Murad, M. Munjed. "Inner and Outer Nature: an Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis" (Islam and Science) 21

²⁸ Ibid 26

Judaism

Judaism emphasizes the need to preserve our natural resources and generate new ones for future generations. In the Talmud, there is the story of the sage Choni, who was walking along a road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" and the man replied "Seventy years". Choni then asked him, "Are you so healthy that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?" To which the man replied, "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise, I am planting for my children." In fact, tradition values this concept so dearly that the rabbis teach that if a man is planting a tree when the messiah appears, he should finish planting the tree before going to greet him.²⁹ In Judaism, there are rituals to celebrate the Earth, such as the festival of *Tu B'Shvat*, the new year for trees and blessings for enjoying nature. In these rituals we find the truest expression of inner Judaist thought. God created the earth, which is a gift from him to men to cherish and not ruin.

Hinduism

From Hinduism, it is clear that the most ancient texts on Hinduism demonstrate through the praise of the deities an ecological awareness and great respect for the natural world. There are number of specific teachings on environmental matters contained in all these Hindu writings and ecological activists have drawn much inspiration from these texts.

- "Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution".³⁰
- "Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere".³¹
- "Destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty".³²

One uniquely practical example of the protection of the environment is from Hinduism. The Bishnois people's defence of the natural environment is one of the world's classic instances of martyrdom in defense of the environment. It is on record that in 1730, Amrita Devi, a Bishnois woman was at home with her three daughters when it came to her knowledge that a party of woodcutters sent by the Maharaja of Jodhpur were on their way to fell a green Khejri tree to be used in the construction of the his new palace. She fought to prevent the woodcutters from felling the tree and was killed by them for her resistance, also killed were her three daughters. This news spread like wildfire among the Bishnois community and hundreds of them converged on the spot, ready to lay down their lives for

²⁹ *Avot d' Rebbe Natan* 31b

³⁰ *Rig Veda* 6:48:17

³¹ *Yajur Veda* 5:43

³² *Charak Sanhita* in Ibe, Julian C. 2017. 77.

this cause and indeed, 363 of them died in the process. This is known as the Khejrli Massacre.

Buddhism

The Buddhist worldview is profoundly ecological. Buddhism is an ecological religion. It profoundly expresses human identification with nature. Buddhists believe that all things, including humans, exist through their interrelationship with all other parts of nature, and for one to think of one's self as isolated from the rest of nature is be unrealistic. José Kalapura states:

The Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential. By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of all lives. The simplicity of life involves developing openness to our environment and relating to the world with awareness and responsive perception. It also enables us to enjoy without possessing, and mutually benefit each other without manipulation.³³

The Need for Ecotheology

Brunner et al propose an ecotheology in their work *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History and Praxis*. Having traced Christianity's history with creation, they discuss the birth of contemporary Christian ecotheology. They then discuss the relationship between Trinity and ecology trying to bridge the gap between God's transcendence and God's immanence quoting Landgon Gilkey who says "God transcends the world as distinct from it, and yet God is immanent within the world as the source of its being, as the principle of its life and order, and as the ground of its hope for fulfillment".³⁴ They also relate creation to the humanity of Jesus in three ways: his unique relationship to the land seen in his used of nature in his parables and teachings, his fulfillment of the role of the Hebrew prophet who fearlessly spoke against the dominant powers that oppressed the poor, and his *cruciformity* in which he took up servanthood thus subverting the tradition of domination.³⁵ Finally they discuss the theology of the Spirit and creation in which they establish that the Spirit infuses life into creation, giving it the ability to freely adapt and grow to its fulfilment.³⁶ For Brunner et al, doing ecotheology will involve, among others, developing an ecological mind-set,

³³ Kalapura, José. *Science-Religion Dialogue & Ecology: An Asian Perspective.*" In Robert A. White, *Spiritual Foundations of an Ecologically Sustainable Society*, Journal of Bahá'í Studies 7.2, 1995. 47-74.

³⁴ Brunner, Daniel L., Butler, Jennifer L. and Swoboda, A.J. *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History and Praxis*, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014. 100.

³⁵ Ibid 105.

³⁶ Ibid 113.

cultivating awareness, resisting consumerism, conserving water, reducing waste, keeping a garden and greening the church in leadership, land and space, worship and mission.

Boff proposes an eco-spirituality which he describes as feeling, loving and thinking as earth. He recommends an ecological sustainable spirituality which will be the fruit of the new sensitivity that underlies the new cosmology. Simplicity is one of the major qualities of this spirituality since it is the most human of all virtues. For him, simplicity will guarantee the sustainability of our planet. It will entail standing up to the consumerist and wasteful culture of the times and trying to be content with our basic needs.³⁷ Eco-spirituality lives in faith, hope and love. In faith it makes us understand that our work of caring for creation is not disconnected from that of the Creator. In hope it assures that despite the current challenges, a good future is possible. In love it enables us to identify better with the earth.³⁸

Denis Edwards, in his 2006 *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, proposes a change of heart that leads to a new way of living on earth. At the center of his ecological theology is a connection between ecological commitment and Jesus of Nazareth.³⁹ According to him, bringing together commitment to Jesus Christ and commitment to creation is not a novelty in the Christian tradition because it is rooted in deep incarnation. Thus following Jesus today naturally involves ecological commitment.⁴⁰ Similarly, Joseph Sittler suggests a theology for the earth. According to him, the most delicate task awaiting Christian theology is to articulate a theology for nature that will do justice to every aspect of creation. Such a theology must be built on the foundations of the Incarnation and should not encourage the love of heaven in complete separation from the love of the earth.⁴¹

Recommendations

- a. Ecology based Pedagogy: A catechesis built around the love for the environment is necessary in the catechetical formation of the faithful. This should begin from childhood to adulthood. The penny catechism should be revised to inculcate an elaborate teaching on the care of the environment. Since the formation of an individual at infancy influences to a large extent the individual's worldview, then it is necessary to shape the worldview of individuals to accommodate the concern for the

³⁷ Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997. 199.

³⁸ Ibid 201.

³⁹ Edwards, Dennis. *Tree of Life: A Theological Reflection on Laudato Si*. Catholic Earthcare Australia, June 2016. 48.

⁴⁰ Ibid 64.

⁴¹ Joseph Sittler in Berry, R.J. (Ed.). *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives – Past and Present*, London: T&T Clark, 2006. 55.

ecosystem beginning from childhood. Children should be taught “to love God, your neighbor and your environment”. Ecological stewardship is the duty of all Christians and training individuals for this purpose should be a major objective of our catechetical formation.

- b. **Concretizing Eco-theology:** There is a wide lacuna between speculative theology and practical Christian living and this is very evident in the high percentage of Catholics who are completely ignorant of the Church’s teaching on the relationship between human beings and their environment. Little wonder a parasitic attitude towards the planet and its resources is the general approach. Concretizing eco-theology will entail presenting the Church’s ecological doctrine in a more practicable manner to the faithful. A good starting point will be a presentation of the Gospel in its creational context. The cosmic dimension of theology should be a major theme in Christian theological formation. A sound theology of creation consolidated by the message of the incarnation that portends an eschatological dimension of the cosmic world is vital in creating ecological consciousness.
- c. **Ecology-themed Homilies:** The Liturgy of the Word is an indispensable part of the Eucharistic celebration. One essential part of this liturgy is the homily. It should be the goal of homilists to consciously awaken a sense of ecological devotion in the hearts of the faithful through the preaching of eco-themed homilies. While the relationship between God and human beings is the focus of homiletics, homilists must promote a relationship that interweaves love between God, human beings and the rest of creation. Cosmic solidarity should be a major objective of our kerygma.
- d. **Enhancing Eco-spirituality:** Encouraging an eco-spirituality among the faithful is one new challenge facing the Church today. Spirituality goes beyond religiosity which is merely the outward expression of religious devotion. There is an intimate connection between love and holiness. A spirituality oriented towards the ecosystem must be instigated in the hearts of the faithful. For this to succeed, an unbreakable link between holiness and the love of nature must be highlighted in Christian life.
- e. **Parish and Diocesan Ecological Projects:** Dioceses and parishes should undertake ecological projects. These can come in the form of tree planting, waste management and environmental sanitation. Tree planting should be a major project for every parish to create a healthy environment for respiration. Waste management and recycling can be diocesan projects.
- f. **Sacramental Ecology:** The sacraments are avenues through which the gospel of nature can be propagated. Two very important sacraments in this regard are the Eucharist and Penance. Because of the union between the incarnation and ecology, the Eucharist has an unbreakable relation with the environment. The faithful must see how devotion to the Body of Christ provokes devotion to the nature which He came to perfect. In

March 2008, the Vatican published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, an update on the list of deadly sins to which they added the destruction of the environment. The Sacrament of Penance should be an avenue through which people should come to realize the mortal harm of environmental degradation and find respite from their transgressions.

- g. Ecological Inculturation: Adopting and adapting certain practices from African cultures will go a long way in enhancing a practical application of the love for the environment. The Church in Nigeria should identify those traditional ecological practices that do not contravene the gospel message and find a way to integrate them into the Church's life. One of such practices is the observance of certain festivals that promote an ecological culture. These festivals can be stripped of their fetish elements and adopted into the Catholic calendar. In this way, the Church can celebrate festivals that appreciate the gift of nature.
- h. Ecumenical Collaboration and Ecological Dialogue: From the ecumenical perspectives seen earlier, it is evident that the issue of ecological preservation is not alien to other ecclesial communities and world religions. It is therefore incumbent on the Church to seek ways of fostering collaboration with other ecclesial communities and religions with a view to saving our common home. As we seek meeting points for dialogue and ecumenism, the preservation of our natural habitat should be a good starting point, since the effects of ecological misbalances are felt by all irrespective of denominational or religious orientation.

Conclusion

This work is aimed at engendering an integral ecotheology. This is because the idea of human beings as conquerors and lords of the earth may have been exaggerated and this has led to many abuses. The origin of the ecological crisis can be traced to the wrong attitude of human beings towards nature. This attitude calls for a redefinition of the concept of development based on ethical ecological guidelines. Any form of development that will create greater harm for the future than good for the present, is merely ephemeral and inimical to the overall progress of the biological community. Such a development should be aborted before its effects become irreversible. The task of Christian theology is to generate in human hearts, through the study of God's dictates, a profound love for the Creator and the world He has created and loves. Human beings must realize that, as fellow creatures of God, they are part of a cosmic family. In this family, the interdependence of members is the key to the survival of the whole family. How to engender this sense of love and responsibility towards the created world is the goal of ecotheology.

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