

## **Christianity's Double Role To Ecological Crisis: Towards An Ethics Of Survival**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The environmental issues have been at the very top of the people's concern all over the world. There has been an extraordinary set of indicators of a rapidly rising public concern, ranging from practical to theoretical efforts toward conservation, such as, rallying environmental conservation campaigns, Green conservation movements, and also struggle to institute a viable environmental ethic. Even though humanity has faced ecological problems at other earlier times they have presently taken a new urgency due to their scope and gravity. It is now evident that, damage to the environment has an irreversible impact on man and nature. Thus, the ecological crisis on the horizon at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is at a point where the very survival of humanity and all that is, is in grave danger.

#### **Ecological gravity**

The ecological movements, Green parties, environmentalists and the Church can be credited for putting the questions of the crisis on the fore. However, they can be criticized since the solutions they have put forth are ultimately not as effective, since more than often, they start from a shaky foundation of blame on one party, overlooking the inherent link between the environmental destruction and the profit logic capitalism. Northcott in realizing that all are involved, pointed out that the ecological crisis is a global as well as a local phenomenon in which we are all caught up.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to list some of the elements of ecological crisis: namely, climate change and global warming, air and water pollution, soil deterioration and forest destruction, threats to biodiversity, industrial disasters and nuclear risks among others, where we all participate whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. The World Commission on Environment and Conservation in the same line of thought asserts that,

The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions and needs. Attempts to defend it in isolation have given the word 'environment' a connotation of naivety in some political circles. The word 'development' has also been narrowed by some into a very limited focus, along the lines of 'what poor nations should do to become richer' and thus again is automatically dismissed by many in the international arena as being a concern of specialists, of those involved in questions of development assistance. But the 'environment' is where we all live; 'development' is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the two are inseparable.

Owing to the awareness of these environmental crises, blame has been put on several factors. Christianity has the highest percentage for the global ecological crisis blame, because of the biblical concept of 'dominion and stewardship' as often understood in the creation stories.<sup>3</sup> However, recent scholars have come to the awareness that the causation of ecological crisis is in reality deep and multi-factorial and cannot be reduced to the influence of just one doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Other aspects include: First, technological and economic issues such as

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 2-12.

<sup>2</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development Chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, *Our Common Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) xi.

<sup>3</sup> The Pioneer of such a view is Lynn White in her article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155 (March 10 1967) 1202-1207. She asserts that the roots of ecological crisis are religious. Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.

<sup>4</sup> Michael S Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 81-84. He includes other factors that may have contributed to degradation of the environment.

modern science and technology, growths of industrial method of production, global market in natural resources among other new innovations. Secondly, ecofeminists throughout history have referred to the patterns of gender oppression and domination that had and still have a great impact on human's relation with other species.<sup>5</sup> In addition, during the renaissance period references are made to the affirmation of "man" as the measure of all things and a consequent loss of respect for God, the creator. Northcott also stresses the rise of western individualism and materialism with its growing focus on material achievement in this life as central to all human goods and purposes, rather than as an anticipation for the life to come in the future.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, ecological and environmental responses to such crisis have also been varied as its roots as Northcott portrays.<sup>7</sup> Quite a number of theories have been established to counter the degradation, although their impact is not as massively felt. In this sense, due to the advancement of the environmental threat to humanity and the ecosystem, an effective response or rather a viable and practical ethic is highly needed. Hence, in this paper, we wish to work towards a practical ethic that would save the earth now and in the future.

In order to realize our expectations, it is important to bear in mind that some aspects have to be implemented. First, there should be a reconnection of people and the land in our present culture, so as to trigger the zeal of participation, that is, recovery of the ecological spirit. Second, since the present theories are not as effective, any effective and practical response to the ecological crisis requires that the dominant theories be supplemented or better succeeded by an alternative theory that gives a high propriety to an ecological sustainable future for the earth. Third, for such an ecological theory or ethic to be relevant to the circumstances of our time and time to come, it should be consistent and conversant with the facts of ecology, taking each and every aspect into consideration, for none exists in isolation. Finally, such an ethic should also have a high concern in changing and reordering a new image and attitude of man towards nature; hence it should be based on both integration and partnership with God and nature.

Following the above stipulations, we wish to scrutinize some of the theories offered to save the environment. Among the principle theories to be tackled include deep ecological thinking, ecofeminist attempts/Gaia hypothesis, and finally process theology.<sup>8</sup> Christian environmental thought will be taken over, where by its defence from its critics will be shortly evaluated. After which we will try to access its feasibility, as a foundation for the proposed theory. We will then move on to explain the proposed theory that attempts to reconstruct a new image of man, as an inter-related entity, the only stance to a brighter and guaranteed hope in the future. Although ecologists have agreed on many issues there is yet not grand theory of sustaining ecology.

### **Different Ecological Theories Examined**

Our attempts to evaluate the mentioned theories above, will involve three aspects. In particular we will concern ourselves with the ideologies of each theory, the criticisms it has so far received, and finally, an evaluation of its viability and practicality in saving the earth, whereby our conditions will play an important role.

#### *a) Deep Ecology*

Deep ecology is a philosophical ideology coined by Arne Naess in the year 1972.<sup>9</sup> Naess argued that human persons needed a 'deeper' understanding of their relationship with nature.<sup>10</sup> It is based on two principles. First is the interrelatedness of all systems of life on earth. Deep ecologists hold that an ecocentric attitude is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on earth. Instead of regarding human persons need to develop a less dominating and aggressive posture towards the earth if we need our – and planet's survival. They therefore offer an instant refute of anthropocentrism.<sup>11</sup> Second principle is a cry for a need of self-realization. Its proponents hold that humans should learn to identify themselves with trees, animals and plants, that is, the

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<sup>5</sup> See, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Michael S Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Chap 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The theories were chosen with regard to their substance that promises a future in the sustenance of the ecology.

<sup>9</sup> See, Arne Naess, "A Place of Joy in a World of Fact." *The North American Review* (Summer 1973b): 53-57. Reprinted in Sessions, 1995, pp 249-258; Naess, "Self- Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" ( Keith Roby Memorial Lecture, March 12, 1986a, reprinted in Sessions, 1995, pp 225-239; and Naess and Rothernberg, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. See also Harold Glasser, "Deep Ecology Approach and Environmental Policy," *Inquiry* 39 (1996) 157-187.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Glasser, "Deep Ecology Approach and Environmental Policy," 180. "Instead of a more anthropocentric approach that assumes that humans were unique, we need to conceive ourselves simply as one integral part of the biosphere."

whole of ecosphere. In this sense, they would not do certain things that do harm to the earth, just as none can harm any of his/her body parts.

However, the problem with this ideology is that, it visualizes a new kind of totalitarianism, which would compel people to change their social practices and to control their behaviour totally, so as to make it attune to the demands of the ecosphere. Deep ecologists want all of humanity to return and embrace a way of life that is totally tied to the rhythms of the earth. But as it stands now, we have disturbed those rhythms that we cannot even consider going back, since complying with such would in fact be dooming the earth to destruction. What we need now is to be more engaged in trying to repair the damage already caused and all any anticipated damage. Therefore, following our conditions, even though deep ecology advocates for interconnectedness, it fails to project its ideology to the future, where our hope lies. It fails to appreciate the partnership between nature and humanity and as a result promotes ecosphere (non-human) and none can work alone.

b) *Ecofeminist Attempts/Gaia Hypotheses*

These two theories, though different, share a common idea. Women are known to bring forth life on earth, caring and also nurturing. They as a result, see themselves as self-sustaining. Most ecofeminists associate themselves with Gaia – a Greek female goddess known to have drawn the living world forth from chaos.<sup>12</sup> Ecofeminism is for the position that “there are important connections – historical, experiential, symbolic, and theoretical, between the domination of women and the domination of nature.”<sup>13</sup> Warren raised the issue of how to express ecofeminist moral insights in beginning to develop “ecofeminism as a feminist and environmental ethic.”<sup>14</sup> They claim that the real problem is not anthropocentrism but androcentrism – male centredness. Hence, environmental problems cannot be solved until the issue of patriarchy is resolved. Gaia hypothesis was a formulation of James Lovelock in the mid 60's, although it was not put in publication till the year 1979.<sup>15</sup> It states that the earth is alive. It presupposes that our planet functions as a single organism that maintains conditions necessary for its survival. Throughout history the concept of mother earth, on which the hypothesis holds on, has been a part of human nature in one form or the other, thus it is not a surprise when embraced by several ecofeminists.

Nonetheless, the two theories have also been looked down upon on certain points of view. It may be true that patriarchy has oppressed women, and as such, has led to exploitation of the earth. But, as we promote egalitarian social relations, we have to bear in mind that getting rid of patriarchy would not necessarily cure the problem. This is because one can still imagine a society with fairly egalitarian social relationships where nature is still used instrumentally. Gaia hypothesis has resulted to many scientific hypotheses, with each hypothesis concentrating on one particular aspect of the ecosphere. For instance, some have devoted their research on global warming while others work on hydrosphere, thus causing a division. The idea of seeing the earth as a living organism provokes one to question; to what extend is our collective intelligence also part of Gaia? Do we, as species continue a Gaian nervous system and a brain, which can consciously anticipate environmental changes? It is evident that these two attempts fail to keep up to our stipulations for they tend to be self-centered.

c) *Process Theology*

Process theology is a philosophical brainchild of Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>16</sup> It argues that evolutionary and ecological insights require human persons to re-conceive nature, humanity and God as interconnected in a set of creative life processes whose outcome is unpredictable. We are in a process of becoming, in that, the goals of life emerge within the process of life itself and that the purposes of God for humans and biosphere are caught up in these uncertain outcomes. This approach invites Christians to re-sacralize the world and all its spheres as the “body of God,”<sup>17</sup> and as a result, the natural order will be treated with new respect.<sup>18</sup> Two sorts of values are recognized in process thought: Instrumental and intrinsic values. The key issue here is “conservation cycle,”

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<sup>12</sup> See, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco, California: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Karen Warren, “The Promise and Power of Ecofeminism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12:2 (1990) 126.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-143. She notes that a feminist ethic is pluralist and it may use right language “in certain contexts and for certain purposes,” but she asserts that ecofeminism “involves a shift from a conception of ethics as primarily a matter of rights, rules, or principles predetermined and applied in specific cases to entities viewed as competitors in the contest of moral standing” to an ethic that “makes a central place for values of care, love friendship, trust, and appropriate reciprocity – values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to our understanding of who we are.”

<sup>15</sup> James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (USA: The Free Press, 1929, reprinted 1978, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; See also Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984).

whereby in preserving nature, it in turn looks after us. This is recognition of instrumental value of nature. Besides this instrumental value to us and other organisms, each individual organism has intrinsic value. The individual is the centre of intrinsic value since humans are experiencing entities. We are not objects but ends with value for ourselves and in process theism to God. Value for ourselves means that our own life is important to us, and it invokes the urge to not only live but to live better.

Critics of process theology claim that this theological position involves a kind of pantheist or has a pantheistic stance, where by God is said to be hidden within the “processes” of the history of being.<sup>19</sup> Instead of human dominion, this approach commends a planetary egalitarianism, in which human comfort, even his survival, must be set in an ethical balance together with the needs and goals of all other living things. This kind of merging entities removes the ground for recognition of the other as that, which is not self. Even though process theology meets up with some of our conditions, its placement of God, the creator as hidden within the processes cannot be tolerated.

### **Synopsis of Christianity and the Environment**

The anthropocentric nature of Christianity, where human person is put at the centre of all, has been blamed for the crisis the environment is experiencing. Such a view cannot be entirely dismissed since all the other factors contributing to the crisis, are as a result of man's need for material benefit.<sup>20</sup> The notion that humans are the crowns of creation, and the only ones made in the image of God, is a concept linked with dominion of humans over the rest of nature. However, this does not mean that Christianity is not conscious of the ecological crisis.

Ecological changes involve a host of normative and theological issues, and participants in the environmental debate have been reformulating questions in religious terms.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the religious community's response to the increasing concern about the relationship between humans and nature has been vast and varied.<sup>22</sup> In some cases it has been forming bodies or organizing campaigns to explore ways and create awareness of the rising environmental consciousness.

A couple of arguments have been posited to counter the blame that Christian theology is at the heart of the environmental problem. Don Brandt has posited a Trinitarian perspective, where he notes that, The human-centred or anthropocentric label often given to Christians, that of domineering utilitarian managers of the environment is not biblically true. God is the creator of the cosmos. Humans and the rest of the universe, whether animate or inanimate, are the created. As a created and dependent life species, people are part of the creation. This means that we are in the same class (the created) as animals, plants, air, water, and rocks. However, human have a special role among the created, in reflecting the image of God. One way we do this is to obey and glorify God in our care for the rest of creation.<sup>23</sup>

Critics have based their arguments of the creation stories concerning the terms “dominate” and “subdue”. However, if a careful and chronological reading of Genesis 1:26-28 is anything to go by, it shows that God voiced the command of “dominion” before the fall of man. That is, far much later, after He, had seen that his creation was very good (Gen 1:31). Therefore, as Brandt asserts, dominion and subjugation cannot in this context mean ‘indiscriminate enslavement’ or ‘reckless abuse’ of the rest of creation. Domination would mean order and care while “subdue” refers to the work given to humankind by God to bring order.<sup>24</sup> In the same line, Anne Clifford stresses that Christianity, as seen in the whole bible, is very pro-life in all its aspects.

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<sup>19</sup> See Jay McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1989); Charles Birch & John B. Cobb, *Liberating Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Northcott notes that, “Lynn White was not entirely wrong to identify historic roots of the ecological crisis with elements of Christian teaching and influence, for as seen, the end of the middle ages was marked by the emergence of a new humanocentric type of European religion which sustained more instrumentalistic perspective on nature, and accompanied the rise of modern science with its gradual evacuation of divine significance and purposiveness from the cosmos.”

<sup>21</sup> See, Robert Nelson, “Unoriginal Sin: The Judeo-Christian Roots of Ecotheology,” *Policy Review* 53 (1990) 52-59.

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the development of religious environmental thought, see Lawrence E. Adams, *Ecology as Religion: Faith in Place of Fact* (Washington D.C.: Competitive Enterprise Institute, 1993); Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997) Chap 1.

<sup>23</sup> Don Brandt, “Stealing Creation's Blessing,” *God's Stewards: The Role of Christians in Creation Care*. Don Brandt eds., (USA: World Vision International, 2002) 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

The bible is unquestionably not anti-ecological. The criticism of Genesis creation stories, voiced by many environmentalists and ecologists, is based on a simplistic literal reading of them and clearly does not represent the core meaning of the text.<sup>25</sup>

As earlier stated, the criticisms on the anthropocentric nature of Christianity are not void. Thus, Christianity should be rightly criticized for abusing or rather neglecting its prophetic call on behalf of justice for creation. As for the critics, knowledge and understanding are gifts from God and should be used to glorify the creator and benefit creation. Significant restoration and renewal of the environment are possible; we just need to go back to our drawing table, with a common motive.

Matthew Fox commenting on other theories, which put emphasis on one aspect over the other, has called for an end to dualism, in which humans and nature are seen as separate. He instead calls for a "creation-centred spirituality," which overturns the usual Christian emphasis on the fall and redemption.<sup>26</sup> This call qualifies Christianity in her ability of saving the earth since it becomes increasingly difficult to separate Christianity and the environment. Therefore, a revised theology of nature that appreciates interconnectedness and mutuality between God, humanity and nature, may be helpful to the task at hand.

### **Grounds for a better environmental ethic**

Emphasis on human persons at the expense of moral values located in the larger created order, has posed problems to other theories. Christian tradition has always placed moral value not on human persons or nature, but in the being of God. God loves the creation and sets a relational order of mutuality and interdependence deep within the created order that reflects God's own relational being. Therefore, the whole creation shares moral value and man is not seen as the only entity with value.<sup>27</sup> God loves matter as well as the spirit, and in these, a mutual unity of interrelatedness is evoked.

The mutuality involves recognition of the other's otherness, for if the other is not recognized for who it is, then differences and suffering occur. It is at this point that stewardship comes in, not carrying a master-servant relation meaning, but portraying a co-working relationship. It is not a static instance but a continuous occurrence that has to be respected and kept unbiased. God, the creator, is a God of justice, keeping each and every entity up to its duties. It was His desire and still is that the ecosystem would hold into equilibrium. Conversely, humanity has failed and as Hans Schwarz asserts, "the failure to conserve the land is not only a misuse of God's gift but a sin."<sup>28</sup> The reason for such has been attributed to the idea that "human kind alone is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27)." However, humankind's image of God gives us unique responsibility among the created, with His help, in that, only people can serve God as His stewards.

In order to effectively work towards our goal, two aspects have to be practically implemented. First, Northcott has raised a concern over our insufficient worship to God as His stewards.

Worship, true or false, is at the heart of our ecological crisis. It is precisely the modern devotion to the cult of consumerism which is driving the horrific global scale of environmental destruction.<sup>29</sup>

True worship of God, our creator, is called upon with repentance to all our sins, even our ecological sins. Radford Ruether has emphasised on "greening liturgy" or integrating ecology into liturgy, which will help in restoration and redemptive transformation of both the ecology and humanity as we worship God. In the same line is her idea on "cosmic Christology in the liturgy" where Christ is understood as a co-creator, sustainer and redeemer of all, both humanity and the earth.<sup>30</sup> Second, is the understanding of the connectedness of *dikaiousuneTheou* (righteousness/justice of God) as portrayed by Apostle Paul. Our God is a just and a righteous God, justice flows from Him, and what He has willed will come to accomplishment. These two attributes are also attested in the Hebrew bible,<sup>31</sup> but we limit ourselves to the Pauline understanding. The righteousness of

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<sup>25</sup> Anne M. Clifford, "Foundations for a Catholic Ecological Theology of God," *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, eds., Drew Christiansen and Walter Glazer (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996) 27.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988) 74.

<sup>27</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* Chap 5.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Schwarz, "A Critique of Christendom's Relation to Land with Direction Towards a Christian Land Ethic," *Forum Papers* (Au Sable Institute, Madison, Wis, 1987) 18.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Northcott, "The Spirit of Environmentalism," *The Care of Creation*, eds., R.J. Berry (Leicester, UK: Inter-versity Press, 2000) 168.

<sup>30</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecological Theology: Roots in Tradition, Liturgical and Ethical Practice for Today," *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 42:3 (Fall, 2003) 231.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed analysis on ecological justice see, James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) Chap 7.

God for Paul is God's attribute, which is passed on to, reckoned to or, imputed to his people.<sup>32</sup> This means that, His justice and righteousness is shared among His people, who in turn care for the earth through his providence, and this is what He is, remaining faithful and keeping the covenant that He established with His people. In this sense the three entities work together.

Putting such points into consideration, the prescribed unity between God, humanity and nature brings everything in a perfect harmony with the other, hence opening space of recognizing the otherness of the other. This would eliminate the need for any concern about which is the appropriate institutional approaches, theory or structures to follow in conserving one entity. It will be a dream come true, so let us get on the move with Charles Reich's words as our hope, "there is a revolution coming...Its ultimate creation will be a new and enduring wholeness and beauty – renewed relationship of man to [God], to Himself, to other men, to society, to nature, and to the land."<sup>33</sup>

## II. CONCLUSION

Environmental concerns have surfaced time after time with variance as we have seen. The attempts to restore and conserve nature have had also been varied, since those who feel affected by problems in their environment have naturally taken action. This is as such an individualistic approach that is detrimental to the course. Christianity has had declined or rather ignored her calling to environmentalism, and as a result, environmentalism has been and still is currently driven by secular and modern scientific concerns.

However, we have been challenged to take up our responsibility as Christians, for we hold the necessary tools to save the earth. We just need to participate actively and practically, by confessing of ecological sin, recognition of Christ as the locus of ecological salvation, and clinging to the unfailing providence of God. As God's stewards on earth we are answerable to him, for he is a righteous and just God. Hence, reconciliation and forgiveness, mutuality and interconnectedness are fundamental features and values to embrace in Christian environmental ethics.

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<sup>32</sup> See Thomas N. Wright, "The Law in Romans 2," J.D.G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law*. The Third Durham Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September, 1994)(Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 131-150. Wright explains Rom. 2 in almost exclusively collective terms, whereas for Paul there is also an unavoidably individual concern throughout. Wright does not emphasize upon justification as concerning the individual's standing before God.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970) 4.

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