

JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A CALL FOR RADICAL RE-EVALUATION OF STEWARDSHIP

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The universe, made up of both spiritual and corporeal creatures, is ontologically, spiritually and morally a being in its own right. We must strongly believe that the hierarchy of things in the universe is not meritorious because inequality found in either natural things or among things has no humiliation of any creature as its primary aim. It rather demonstrates the justice of God because there is no injustice in God.

Like the human and the intelligible part of the universe, nature and its environment too have a fundamental reason to be. While the earth has existed with human beings for centuries, and can exist without human beings today, we cannot exist without it. Thus, nature ought to be at the centre of responsible care of creation. This is the biocentric approach to nature. Accordingly, the universe should be reconsidered as a unity that entirely deserves a special sort of respect and recognition. This view, as shall be argued in this contribution, is grounded on the idea of the good and inherent worth of things, a good and inherent worth that originates from a Good, as pointed out by Paul Taylor.¹

Reflecting on Biocentric Nature

The Biocentric approach to nature requires thoughtful reflection. The appropriate attitude towards living things depends on how we conceive them and our relationship with them and the world. The moral significance of the natural world depends on the way we critically appraise the entire ecosystem in relation to our role in it. Following Paul Taylor, there are four beliefs that form the core of the biocentric approach:

- (a) *Humans are members of the earth's Community of Life in the same sense and on the same terms with other living members of that Community, the hierarchical structure notwithstanding.*
- (b) *Human species, along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence. As such, the survival of each living thing, as well as its chance of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things.*
- (c) *All organisms are teleological centres of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own way.*
- (d) *Humans are not inherently superior to other living things.*²

From the above, human life is an integral part of the biosphere. We thus conceive of the place of humans in the system of nature in the same way we conceive of the place of other species. There is a common relationship to the earth that we share with wild animals and plants. Full awareness of this common relationship gives us a sense of true community with them. Therefore, as far as our relation to the Earth's ecosystems is concerned, we see ourselves as but one species – a population among many in an active and living system. Thus, we keep at the forefront of our consciousness the characteristics we share with all forms of life on Earth. The being of each living organism is very

1. Paul Taylor, "Are Humans Superior to Animals and Plants?," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 149-160. See also his *Respect for Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1989.

2. Taylor, "Are Humans Superior to Animals and Plants?" For further reading on this idea, see also his "Ethics of Respect for Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 197-218; *Id.*, "Significance of the Biotic Community & Ecological Studies," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 10 (1935): 291-307.

important and contributes to the life and being of the planet Earth.

Not only is our common origin in one creational or evolutionary process fully to be acknowledged, the common environmental circumstances that surround us all must be attended to. According to James Lovelock's '*Gaia Hypothesis*', we are one with them, not apart from them. When all said and done, we can then claim that we are ready to affirm our fellowship with them as equal members of the whole community of life on Earth that is active and alive. This complex community is held together by that same flow of energy, which vivifies the Earth. This is why the biosphere has operated, as does a living organism, naturally modifying its own environment and so maintaining conditions suitable for its own survival.

When we think of ecological survival, maintenance and preservation, we think of the nature that 'houses' humans and other beings. Hence, nature ought to be admired and cared for as one would admire and care for his or her body; even animals do that much. Even though our natural environment can take care of itself,³ given that for our comfort, we interfere with its naturalness, we ought to maintain, preserve with respect, and sustain it because we live with and in it. We have a responsibility to do this.

Christian Vision of Nature and the Stewardship Model

The word 'nature' has different meanings. It can refer to the total biological scope of the planet Earth. It can also include the total ecological system of the material world. "Mother Nature" is a term used to describe the whole of the ecological system on the planet Earth. In philosophy, 'nature' can refer to the essence of something. Likewise, theologically, the nature of something is that which makes something what it is. For instance, the nature of God is good, holy, just, immutable, etc. If we were to exclude any of these properties in describing God's nature, he would cease to be what he is. Nature in this article is the available and reachable creation around us; the entire ecosystem including all creatures known and unknown.

3. See John Ifeanyi Okoro, *The Earth as A Living Superorganism: From Scientific Gaia Hypothesis to the metaphysics of Nature* (Hamburg: Peter Lang Pub, 2004), 119.

We measure our stewardship by healthy ecosystems and sustainable, responsible use. From a Christian perspective, the scripture says that God expects, even demands, that we be stewards of his creation. The position of the scripture is undisputable. God created the different species of plants and animals, and blessed them. Christians are called to be stewards, to nurture, to protect, and to preserve His creation. A Christian vision of nature is incomplete without highlighting few traditional representatives in the history of Christianity, whose thoughtful metaphysical doctrines on nature were expressed in the most concrete and primordial symbols. While some viewed nature positively, some had ambivalent views that can be regarded as very hostile and scandalous today. In spite of ambiguities about human attitude to nature within the Christian tradition, we must however, acknowledge the impact of Christian contributions on the development of science in the West. This means, according to Jaki, there is the historical link between Judaeo-Christian metaphysical view of the cosmos and the rise of Western science, prior to science severing the link.⁴

In the Old Testament, there are certain references to the participation of nature in the religious outlook of life, such as when Noah was ordered to preserve all animals whether they were clean or unclean, that is, irrespective of their usefulness or relation to man. Another example is the vision of Hosea in which God entered into covenant with beasts and plants in order to secure peace. Likewise, virgin nature or wilderness is conceived as a place of trial and punishment as well as refuge and contemplation or as the reflection of paradise. This vision and tradition of the contemplative view of nature was to surface later in Judaism in both the kabbalistic and Hassidim schools.⁵ As for the New Testament, a withering and rejuvenation of nature accompany the death and resurrection of Christ. This indicates the cosmic character or nature of Christ. St. Paul also believed that all creation shares in Christ's redemption.

4. Paul Haffner, *Creation and Scientific Creativity: A Study in the Thought of S. L. Jaki* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1991), 33.

5. See S. N. Nasre, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976), 99. Kabbalism is meant to represent a secret organization or society, which was active at the period of Renaissance. Cf. Nasre, *Man and Nature*, 64-65.

In the early church antiquity, as a reaction to paganism, the church gradually became withdrawn and totally distinct from the world about her. The terms such as paradise and wilderness in their positive sense became connected solely with the church and later with the monastery and the university as distinct institutions. Gradually, virgin nature and wilderness became interpreted as a domain of warfare and combat rather than of peace and contemplation.⁶ There emerged a highly developed theology of nature among the early fathers, especially the Greek fathers like Origen, Irenaeus, Maximus the Confessor and Gregory of Nyssa. Origen and Irenaeus are particularly important since they applied the Logos doctrine not only to man and his religion, but also to the whole of nature and all creatures.⁷ The Latin fathers, however, did not for the most part show great interest in nature to the extent that the most famous among them, St. Augustine, in the *City of God* considers nature as fallen and not yet redeemed.⁸

During the Middle Ages, the ninth-century Irish scholar, Johannes Scotus Erigena, stands out. He provided the first metaphysical formulation of nature in the West. In his commentaries on the Bible, he sought to reveal nature's inner meaning. He also commented on Dionysus the Areopagite. Erigena is well known for his *De divisione naturae* dealing with God, creation and the return of creation to God. Some theologians and philosophers, who do not understand a metaphysical and cosmological doctrine of nature, are apt to accuse any doctrine of this kind of being pantheistic. Yet, Erigena was fully aware of the transcendent origin of the universe. Nevertheless, for him, all things in the universe come from God and are created through Christ.

The Bible begins with the statement, 'In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth'. Erigena followed Gregory of Nyssa to conceive of matter as a combination of incorporeal

6. Even the geographic expansion of the Renaissance and the conquest of the New World were accomplished with this motif in mind.

7. See Charles E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology: Volume 1, Science and Religion: The Gifford Lectures 1951* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47.

8. *Ibid.*

qualities rather than an opaque quantity. However, form is that which gives existence to corporeal bodies and relates this domain to higher planes of existence. In the corporeal world as well as through all realms of creation, the Trinity is present, the *essentia* of the Father as the source of existence, the *sapientia* of the Son as the source of wisdom and the *vita* of the Spirit as the life of all things in the Universe.⁹ Therefore, man has a triune nature comprised of the intellect (*nous*), reason (*logos*) and sense (*dianoia*). Erigena also expounds a doctrine of the states of being, and the interrelation between levels in the hierarchy of existence. Actually, this interrelation very much resembles the universal metaphysical doctrines of the Orient.¹⁰ This was before St. Hildegard of Bingen had a vision of the universe similar to that of Hugo of St Victor in which nature is totally the domain of the Spirit manifesting itself in all products of nature.

We also find in St Francis of Assisi, a most startling reminder of the possibility of a reverential attitude towards nature in Christian ascetic spirituality. His life among the birds and beasts was a concrete example of the Christian belief that through holiness man can gain a relationship with nature. This is a return to conditions before the Fall with its ensuing disruption of harmony between humans and nature. In his *Canticle of the Sun*, St Francis displays a disinterested contemplative view of nature outside all human utility. In his conversation with animals and even elements such as fire that he addressed when he was being cauterised, he illustrates the inner relation and intimacy that the saint gains with nature by virtue of his becoming identified with the Spirit that breathes within it.

Anthropocentrism and the Profanation of Nature

The extensive tradition of the spiritual vision of nature as articulated above must be rediscovered in this (post)modern period if the encounter between humans and nature will not end in

9. John Ifeanyi Okoro, *A Complex Living World was Made: By Rational [Faith] and NOT by Tool* (Abuja: Ugwu Press, 2011), 38.

10. See George Bosworth Burch, *Early Medieval Philosophy* (New York, NY: King's Crown Press, 1951); *Id.*, "The Christian Non-Dualism of Scotus Erigena," *Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1954): 209-214.

disaster. This position makes sense if nature is considered to be capable of overpowering humans in its self-defence to survive. Theologians and philosophers to some extent have contributed during the past few centuries to making nature profane. This set the stage for nature's profanation through the industrial revolution, and the interminable application of modern sciences and technologies. This is the historical root to today's environmental crises.

Some scholars have articulated the religious and theological dimensions of current environmental crises. For instance, Lynn White, Jr., and Arnold Toynbee point out that in the three great monotheistic religions, God (always represented as masculine) is a transcendent creator-and-law-giver deity. There is the image of an inseparable gulf between this God and humans, whose only recourse is to always obey the law, the commandments, believe and accept the doctrines, as well as supporting the religious hierarchy. According to White, "*the root of current environmental problems is Judeo-Christian arrogance towards nature*".¹¹ White further accused:

*Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen.... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.*¹²

Callicott, on his part, did not hide his opinion that "the biblical knowledge of good and evil" as expressed in Genesis 3:5 involves a kind of ranking, or evaluating, of items in the world as "good" or "evil" relative to their human utility. Of course, hunters and gatherers partook of such ranking. They knew that some plants were edible and others not. Nevertheless, in the urban-agricultural civilisations this ranking is intensified. Some plants become "good" plants and others become "weeds"; some animals become "good" animals and others become "vermin". Callicott

11. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207, at 1203.

12. Lynn White Jr., *Machina Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA; London England: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 86 & 93.

suggests therefore that as this Christian psychology of the fall stumbles into agriculture then there emerged anthropocentrism in many cultures. Anthropocentrism, for Callicott, is the original sin. In fact, according to him, not what they told us to be original sin and made all of us inheritors despite our fundamental innocence and being born clean and sinless.¹³

On the other hand, J. Passmore has argued that the tradition in question was not Judeo-Christian but rather Graeco-Christian.¹⁴ Wherever the truth lies in the debate, these are logical charges that must be challenged in its practicality, and in concurrence with the case in point of St. Francis of Assisi. Agreeing with White, we must rethink and re-feel our nature and destiny.

According to the polytheistic, animistic religions of prehistoric peoples, in parts of Africa and other parts of the world, all of nature – animals, plants, streams, landscapes, forests, mountains and so on – was animated by living intelligences called 'spirits', with which mediums and ordinary people could be in communication. Even if the environmental documentation of these religions is not above reproach, they at least had a conception of spirituality as immanent within nature. It was either pantheism (meaning that everything that exist be it living or even non living is divine) or panentheism (that the divine is in everything that is, living and non-living). Was this not the theology of the original Europeans and of the Jewish and Christian mystics such as our already mentioned Francis of Assisi and Hildegard von Bingen as well?

Unfortunately, the monotheistic religions decisively altered this worldview. Nature (the world and all it contains) was created by a remote transcendent deity. Nature was inherently corrupt. Tainted by the 'fearful' original sin, it was dark, non-sacred, and finally demonic and frightening. This exactly fits with the command to fight, dominate and conquer. By destroying pagan animism and other similar traditions preserved in

13. J. B. Callicott, "Genesis and John Muir," in *Covenant for a New Creation: Ethics, Religion, and Public Policy*, eds., Carol and C. J. Casemolt (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 122-132.

14. See John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1974).

witchcraft like shamanism, Christianity drastically severed itself from the roots of a regenerative spirituality grounded in the natural world. One might be led to allude that Christianity's general picture is Janus-faced. In order to benefit, it regards nature; at other times, it disregards nature.

Max Weber, for instance, pointed out that Protestantism furthered the development of this negative attitude. It completed the desacralisation of the natural world by focusing on the value of work in the material world. In the modern atheistic, materialist worldview, there is no spiritual being anywhere, either in this life or after death, and either in nature or above it. Hence, there is the unrestrained rule to control, use, and exploit.¹⁵

We do not agree totally with White and Callicott on their ecotheological criticisms of Judaeo-Christian tradition and medieval Christianity respectively for our current environmental crisis. We may not ignore the great works done by medieval scholars, since history may not be read on interpretative and factual grounds only, because religious values cannot be treated independently of the political, economic and social conditions that sustain them. Without the light of a living tradition with its own metaphysics and theology, the present ecological science becomes opaque and unintelligible.

One remembers both the character of the sciences of the Greek world as they came to be known by later ages and the attitude and the reaction of Christianity itself vis-à-vis this heritage. Both are crucial in understanding the attitude of Westerners to nature in subsequent periods of Western history including our contemporary time. Christianity grew from the religion of a few to the spiritual life force of humanity. It began to mould a civilisation, which was distinctly Christian. It developed its own arts, cosmology and sciences of the natural world. Christianity emphasised a rejection of the 'life of this world' while searching for a kingdom not of this world. Consequently, it had to possess the means of equating the techniques of the artisans with Christian activity; it also had to 'marry' the secular world with a

Christian universe. However, it succeeded on both accounts. It created both an artisanal tradition that could construct the medieval cathedrals, microcosms of the Christian vision of the cosmos. Christianity also created a total science of the visible universe, depicted as a Christian one. When man stands in a medieval cathedral, he feels himself at the centre of the world. This could only be brought about through the relation between sacred art and cosmology that existed in medieval Christianity as it had in other traditions. The cathedral recapitulates the cosmos and is its replica on the human plane in the same way that the medieval city with its walls and gates is a model of the bound medieval universe.¹⁶

Judeo-Christian Domination vs. Stewardship Tradition

The Hebrew Bible remains a tremendous treasure today. It carries moral and spiritual messages of great antiquity, which are nevertheless still valid. It even suggests that non-human species do not exist simply for human pleasure or utility. Indeed, this 'heresy' is central to the reintroduction of the wild ass in the Negev Desert. Even the most secular Israelis will agree that the Bible is vital to the ethical fibre of the society. Many of course will also lament the misinterpretations of the scriptures down the ages. Consider, for example, the oft-quoted Genesis 1:26:

And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition has been blamed for promoting a ceaseless and rapacious attitude to the environment. 'Go forth and multiply and subdue the earth and have dominion over it.' Here we have a projection of empire mentality on our relation with 'domineering' nature. Humans are to conqueror 'to be subdued' nature. Hence, nature became seen as useful possession, to be overwhelmed and displaced ('multiply'). Humans

15. Ralph Metzner, "The Emerging Ecological Worldview," in *Worldviews and Ecology*, eds., M. E. Tucker and J. A. Grim (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 163-172, at 167-168.

16. It may not be surprising that the great and beautiful walls of European cities began to be broken about the same time that heliocentric astronomy destroyed the idea of the world as cosmos or 'order' and removed the finite boundary of the universe.

are separate from nature, and as some will say, even superior to it. In this tradition, we have responsibility neither to nature nor for it. Human beings owe responsibility only to God and to themselves. This responsibility, however, makes humans stewards of God for nature because it has intrinsic value, which also glorifies the Creator.

Anthropic attitude, according to Barrow and Tipler, is a consequence of our own existence.¹⁷ Since the dawn of recorded history, humankind has used the local and global environment to good advantage, e.g. the soil and the fruits for food, the heavenly bodies for navigation, and the winds and waves for power. These outcomes might naturally lead to a conclusion that the world in all its richness and subtlety, delicacy and nicety was contrived for human benefit alone, inimitably premeditated for them rather than merely fortuitously used by them. In the Hebrew Bible, we see the idea of a providential plan in creation as a key feature of the creation narratives and the epic poetry of the Wisdom and prophetic writings. The idea of a partially anthropocentric universe with teleological purpose is part of the Judaeo-Christian world-view that underlies the growth of Western civilisation.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the light of a more mature understanding of the meaning of creation, the powers given to humankind are not those of a sovereign but of a steward. Moreover, if humankind was created, as Genesis states, in the image of God, then our exploitative, battering, and polluting behaviour towards nature is a corruption of our own status and an affront on the great force that unites nature and us. Humankind exists in nature just as nature in a way exists in humankind. As stewards of creation, human beings have a special position within it. Nevertheless, through us the universe reflects upon itself and its Creator. Consciousness, self-transcendence and power are central to the

17. John Barrow and Frank Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27.

18. For more, see Haffner, *Creation and Scientific Creativity*, chapters three and four.

privilege we possess. These confer immense powers that should be used to create a balanced relationship between nature and us.

The first chapter of Genesis speaks of man's dominion over nature. The second chapter in contrast goes on to say that God placed man in the Garden of Eden not as a master but rather in the spirit of stewardship. Actually, this carries a meaning that humans ought to work as partners of God in continuing and improving his creation or at least in giving it a more human expression. A revised Christian version of stewardship suggests that the rights of all God's creation should be treasured. In the light of this, Jeremy Rifkin, for example, calls for a "*second Christian Reformation*", a radical re-evaluation of the stewardship doctrine based on ecological principles of diversity, interdependence, and decentralisation. He holds that:

Maintenance replaces the notion of progress, stewardship replaces engineering. Biological limits to both production and consumption are acknowledged.... If the Christian community fails to embrace the concept of a New Covenant vision of stewardship, it is possible that the emerging religious fervour could be taken over and ruthlessly exploited by right-wing and corporate interests.¹⁹

There are practically a dozen different Hebrew words, which have been translated into English as 'dominion' or 'rule'. In biblical Hebrew, though, each of these words has a meaning much more precise than merely the exercise of authority. Some words are used to characterise the rule of tyrants, while others refer to responsible stewardship, and yet other words denote the power of intellectual persuasion. What sort of 'dominion' is envisioned in Genesis 1:26? A compelling argument is that the intent of the passage is to impress upon humanity a very substantial responsibility for the wellbeing of 'every creeping thing that creepeth upon earth'. That this is the most correct meaning of this passage may be inferred from the many religious ceremonies and laws, which assured the conservation of nature in ancient Israel.