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*Editorial*

**ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Human beings' relationship with the rest of the universe has often been ambiguous and uneasy. From fear, awe and adoration to nature and natural forces we have reached an era in which human beings have managed to be in control of the natural forces to a great extent.

However, attempts to control and 'dominate' nature and to exploit natural resources for human welfare alone have had negative consequences as well. It is often felt that world religions have in the past neglected the environmental concerns, blinded by the industrial and technical progress of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At least from the time of the publication of Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,"<sup>1</sup> Christianity is accused of having been responsible for the ecological crisis. Environmental activists and philosophers sharply criticize that Christianity, assigning to the humans the role of 'subduing the earth' and 'dominating' it, promoted unbridled exploitation of the nature leading to the present crisis. Peter Singer describes as follows the dominant Western approach to nature: "According to the dominant Western tradition, the natural world exists for the benefit of human beings... Human beings are the only morally important members of this world. Nature itself is of no intrinsic value, and the destruction of plants and animals cannot be sinful, unless by this destruction we harm human beings."<sup>2</sup> Singer traces back this approach to Aristotle, who regarded nature as a hierarchy in which those with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of those with more, and points out that Aquinas followed this same

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<sup>1</sup>Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 Mar 1967) 1203-1207.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (second edition, reprint), 267-268.

position, complementing it with God's command in Genesis. According to Singer, this was the approach of the mainstream Christianity at least till 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

We are beginning to learn how unscrupulous exploitation of natural resources and unbridled development become a threat to the very existence of human beings and life on earth. In recent years, we have become more acutely aware of the crisis of the ecological system. As a result, religious, political, scientific worlds feel the need of re-thinking their attitude and approach to the earth and its resources and of a concerted effort to save our planet.

Christianity and other religious traditions may have their own responsibility in not playing an adequate role in preventing the ecological crisis. But, giving all the responsibility to them seems to be unjust and imbalanced. The ecological crisis as we experience today, is comparatively a new phenomenon. Factors other than the Christian tradition seem to be more responsible for this crisis. It may be perhaps said that the Christian tradition was not prepared to foresee the ecological crisis and face it in time. For example, just consider the ecological crisis in India, the birth place of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, which are exalted as having a positive approach to nature. The present ecological crisis is acutely felt in India and other countries of the East and many developing countries including India continue to ignore ecological concerns opting for development at any cost. Can Christian tradition be held responsible for this?

The neo-liberal economy and politics guided by modern liberalism that propagate individual freedom and human dominion can be said to be at the root of the ecological crisis. The concept of development based on the neo-liberal ideals of competition, struggle and success that aim at maximum production and profit, views everything on a cost-benefit analysis and money becomes the highest value. This emphasis on individualism together with the technological control has made the human the 'lords and masters' of the earth with a self-assumed right to use it for his/her benefit. On the one hand, this neo-liberal ideal of 'compete and benefit' has drastically changed the living conditions dramatically improving the 'standard of life'; on the other hand, the manipulation of marketing interests has led to the

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<sup>3</sup>Cfr Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (second edition, reprint), 267.

'mania of consumerism' and the 'culture of waste'.<sup>4</sup> Science and Technology perceived as having the sole function of dominating and exploiting nature is also responsible for the present ecological crisis. "Science is supposed to overpower, tame and control nature and humans to subjugate nature and extract from it all that it can yield to make human life happy and prosperous... The dualistic science views nature only in a utilitarian and instrumentalist perspective. Nature does not have any intrinsic value."<sup>5</sup> The modern state and political structures are convinced that only science and technology, which actually follow this ideology, can solve problems of underdevelopment and promote prosperity of human community. In fact, this attempt of the science to control and dominate the nature, together with the liberalist and neo-liberalist economy and politics can be said to be the most important reasons behind the present day ecological crisis. Christianity failed to prevent the onslaught of these alluring ideologies.

There is a growing awareness that the ecological crisis is basically an ethical issue, considering both its effects and the ways to solve it. At the root of the ecological crisis is a greed and competition based economy. "Unchecked, this system and pattern of life will lead the human species to disaster and even extinction."<sup>6</sup>

Here, the role of religion and ethics become important. We need "a counter cultural revolution that will accept a shift of emphasis from material acquisition to inner spiritual growth."<sup>7</sup> That is, a change in the present dominant life-style proposed by the market economy and consumerism is needed. This does not mean denying the right to live better or to enjoy the life, but denying such a life-style where needs are artificially created to ultimately serve the interests of the market

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<sup>4</sup>Saji Mathew Kanayankal and Johan De Tavernier, "A Theological and Ethical Response to the Climate Change in the Light of the Biblical Covenant Tradition," in *Ethics and Climate Change. Scenarios for Justice and Sustainability*, ed. Matteo Mascia and Lucia Mariani, Padova: Fondazione Lanza, 2010, 199-211, 200-201; John B. Chethimattam, "Ecology and Environment in Catholic Perspective," *Kristu Jyoti* 7, 2 (1991), 46-59; S. Arokiasamy, "Ecological Ethics in a Divided World," *Jeevadhara* 21 (1991) 488-490.

<sup>5</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Ecological Ethics in a Divided World," 489.

<sup>6</sup>Felix Wilfred, "Toward an Inter-religious Eco-theology," *Concilium* (2009/3) 43-54, 46.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Manickam, "Holistic Ethics and Global Environmental Crises," *Journal of Dharma* 33, 2 (2008) 111-132, 114.

and where acquisition of goods and enjoyment become end in themselves. An unending search for new comforts, new forms of luxury and entertainment is to be re-evaluated. The new life-style will focus on right relationship with other persons, with God and with other living and non-living beings on earth.<sup>8</sup> Here, instead of claiming of our 'rights' over nature, we need to first of all or at least equally, think about our 'duties' to nature, based on the interrelatedness with and interdependence of everything in this nature. Ethics of autonomy based on individualism and anthropocentrism ignored the essential relatedness of the person to the community and to nature.<sup>9</sup> Hence we need a paradigm shift for a sustainable "ecosophy" and life vision, which express and explore the interconnectedness of the Spirit and created beings.<sup>10</sup> Human beings are relational beings whose existence becomes meaningful only in interconnectedness. Prioritizing our needs and desires based on our responsibility for the well-being of everyone and everything in the present and future, involves tensions and conflicts. Only strong and profound ethical convictions will help us in such a process. What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles* "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments"<sup>11</sup>

Eco-ethics is basically an issue of justice. Ecological justice encompasses the human society in the present and future and all living and non-living beings on the planet. Moreover, the poor occupies a particular place in ecological ethics. We cannot say that only the poor are affected by the harm done to ecology, but, as in any other case, the poor are the most affected by the harm done to ecology.

It is a sign of hope that religions have rediscovered and continue "to rediscover the broader community of creatures which includes not

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<sup>8</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 287-288; Saji Mathew Kanayankal and Johan De Tavernier, "A Theological and Ethical Response to the Climate Change...", 207-208; S. Arokiasamy, "Ecological Ethics in a Divided World," 485.

<sup>9</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Ecological Ethics in a Divided World," 485; John B. Chethimattam, "Ecology and Environment in Catholic Perspective," 57.

<sup>10</sup>Ajita Kullu, "Ecological Evil: A Christian Response," *Journal of Dharma* 33,2 (2008) 175-184, 183-184.

<sup>11</sup>Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, § 51; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, § 36.

only human beings, but the whole creation."<sup>12</sup> Though the religions have taken a greater interest in the ecological concerns, the immediacy and urgency of the situation demand that they deepen further their understanding and commitment. The current issue of *Asian Horizons* on "Environment and Sustainability" is a humble attempt in this line.

Joseph Pathrapankal explains how biblical spirituality encourages eco-spirituality. In his article "Biblical Eco-concerns in the Context of Asian Religions," he shows that the spirituality of divine immanence, proposed and maintained in the Bible, is the basis of eco-spirituality with its openness to reach out to the whole creation from a spirit perspective. Pathrapankal proposes a new dimension of Asian spirituality, namely, an eco-spirituality which has its fertile and nourishing field in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-socio-economic Asian context. According to him, eco-spirituality can become a basis for a secular spirituality - a spirituality that does not deny religious experience, but includes all people irrespective of religious beliefs and the whole universe.

Awajiusuk, Finomo Julia argues that though a misreading of Gen 1:26-28 is partially responsible for the ecological crisis, it is not the Christian worldview that encourages the abuse of nature, but rather the materialistic pursuit around the world. It is those who see resources of nature as unlimited, and humans as the ultimate authority in the use of the resources who are exploitative. In her article, "Genesis 1:26-28 - A Panacea for Environmental Degradation in Niger Delta, Nigeria," she explains that when environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is weighed in the scale of the divine command in Gen 1:26-28, it becomes glaring that human's reckless use of the environment contradicts God's command. According to her, the most serious threats to the Niger Delta region lie in the growing priority of technology over ethics, the growing primacy of things over persons and the superiority of matter over spirit.

Making use of the imagery of the garden (Gen 2:8) and the city (Rev 22: 2, 19), Julian Saldanha presents the history of humanity as a journey from garden, the God's work to the city, the work of humans. His article, "From Garden to City" depicts that humankind begins in

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<sup>12</sup>Christoph Stueckelberger, *We All are Guests on Earth. A Global Christian Vision for Climate Justice*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2010, 21-22.

the garden but ends in the city. According to him, "the key to peace and happiness lies in harmony of humans among themselves and with God and nature." Development driven by greed, profit for the few and unbridled search for luxury, can only lead to the destruction of the environment and ultimately of humans themselves, he warns. Sustainable development takes account of environmental preservation and hence it is important that humans take their decisions wisely, taking account of the totality of reality.

"Recasting Christian and Cultural Resources for Environment and Sustainability," by Randy J.C. Odchigue presents the contextual experience of the question on environment and sustainability in the Philippine milieu, especially addressing the mining industry. He examines how Christian discourse can overcome its own embedded presuppositions that may have contributed to the environmental colonization and suggests Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas' approach as helpful in overcoming this crisis. Following this, he explores possible cultural resources within the context that may relate to a re-thinking of a Christian framework for just sustainability.

According to Vimal Tirimanna, the FABC documents show that the emerging ecological issues of our world are signs of the times, inviting our serious reflection and response. In his paper, "The FABC and Ecological Issues," he says that the FABC is convinced of the moral imperative to act responsibly and in solidarity towards creation and to share resources of creation more justly. Moreover, the harmony and balance of the natural environment in relation to human life is a fundamental one for the FABC. FABC documents also indicate the need of a "creation spirituality" in the multireligious context of Asia and how such a spirituality can promote further harmony of religions in Asia. For most Asians, the question of ecology and sustainability is a matter of life and death.

In his article, "New Insights in Environmental and Sustainable Ethics," Andrea Vicini, based on an extensive survey of current literature, says that sustainable solutions to our environmental challenges could be identified and tested by looking at nature with new eyes. To promote global environmental justice, Vicini demands greater accountability, nationally and globally, together with concrete and careful planning in resource extraction and energy consumption. He points out how biblical sources, theological tradition, ethical theories and practices, ecclesial structures and liturgical and spiritual

resources are made use of in our attempt to provide sustainable solutions to the environmental challenges, and concludes that, “theological discourse seems to be well equipped to join other forces – scientific, religious, cultural, social, and political – in contributing to shape a renewed sustainable ethos.”

George Peter Pittappilly, a scientist and an activist, presents a model for sustainable development. He considers the environmental disaster as the result of “our unbridled desire for pleasures and the apparent short and seemingly easy path of development that we have taken.” He argues that the new road for the forward journey should be the path of sustainable development and holds that renewable energy resources should power this journey. The article also describes how Mithradham, the first fully solar educational institution in India, has succeeded in demonstrating a sustainable living system in the modern world without rejecting the science and technology developments of the time. Pittappilly concludes by underscoring that, “Solutions to ecological crisis are inspiration, innovation and action at all levels combined with mental and spiritual maturity. It has to start from the individual, permeate in the family and spread to the society, solving the present ecological crisis.”

“‘Healing Our Broken Environment.’ Reflections on Eco-Faith Concerns of the Church after the 3.11-Japan’s Nuclear Disaster” by Sali Augustine reflects on the experience of Japan in the aftermath of the great Earthquake and the tragedy followed by the nuclear accident at Fukushima daiichi (number 1) nuclear plant and the eco-faith concerns of the Church focusing on the Statement of the Japanese Bishops’ Conference which took a stand against nuclear power. He argues that the claim of decontamination is a myth and shows that we have a grave duty to hand the Earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it. He emphasises the need of reinvigorating scientific research for socio-environmental concern which calls for establishing the global focus and of linking science to justice.

Besides the articles on Environment and Sustainability, we have two articles: “Hypostatic Union and the Subtle Body: An Analysis of Christian Yogic Practice” by Mathew N. Schmalz and “Escalating Suicide Rates and the Need to Reinforce Christian Faith Formation” by Saju Chackalackal. Mathew N. Schmalz says that the issue of Christian yogic practice has been central in discussion of Catholic

adaptation to Indian culture. Saju Chackalackal addresses the issue of increasing number of suicides and argues that the right Christian perspectives, especially on controversial issues of life and death, must become the conviction of each Christian through the process of faith formation.

The Christian faith calls us to consider the whole cosmos as sacred, as inhabited by God, as a loving revelation of God. Hence, treating the nature with respect is not merely to prevent an impending ecological disaster, but more than that it is an integral part of our faith and hence an ethical imperative rooted in our faith. Hence, respect for nature should become an integral part of our faith formation, pastoral action and moral obligations. Our commitment to fulfil the mission of redemption achieved by Jesus Christ demands us to be committed to the redemption of the whole universe, which has to be recapitulated in him.

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