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## **BIBLICAL ECO-CONCERNS IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIAN RELIGIONS**

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Thousands of years ago a Hebrew poet, looking at the sky, wrote:

How clearly the sky reveals God's glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next. No speech or words are used, no sound is heard. Yet their message goes out to the entire world and is heard to the ends of the earth. God made a home in the sky for the sun; it comes out in the morning like a happy bridegroom, like an athlete eager to run a race. It starts at one end of the sky and goes across to the other (Ps 19:1-6).

Another Hebrew poet exclaimed:

O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world! Your praise reaches up to the heavens; it is sung by children and babies.... When I look at the sky, which you have made, at the moon and the stars, which you set in their places, what are the humans that you think of them: mere mortals that you care for them? Yet you made them inferior only to yourself: you crowned them with glory and honour. You appointed them ruler over everything you made (Ps 8:1-5).

The Hebrew poet who wrote Psalm 104 meditates on the entire universe as created by God and articulated his thoughts of wonder and joy, seeing the beauty and order of the created universe and

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concluded his cry of joy: "May the glory of the Lord endure for ever! May the Lord be happy with what he has made! May my meditation be pleasing to him" (Ps 104: 31,34).

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian mystic-poet wrote in similar words:

This is my delight, thus to wait and watch at the wayside where shadow chases light and the rain comes in the wake of the summer. Messengers, with tidings from unknown skies, greet me and speed along the road. My heart is glad within, and the breath of the passing breeze is sweet. From dawn till dusk I sit here before my door, and I know that of a sudden the happy moment will arrive when I shall see. In the meanwhile I smile and I sing all alone. In the meanwhile the air is filling with perfume of promise.<sup>1</sup>

Meditating on light, the most wonderful reality, he wrote: "Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, the heart-sweetening light! Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life; the light strikes, my darling the chords of my love; the sky opens, the winds run wild, laughter passes over the earth. The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and jasmynes, surge up on the crest of the waves of light. The light is shattered into gold on every cloud, my darling, and it scatters gems in profusion. Mirth spreads from leaf to leaf, my darling, and gladness without measure."<sup>2</sup>

What is characteristic of these words of the Psalmist and the poet Tagore is their awareness of and the sensitivity to the nature, which exists in one form or another in every culture and in every religion. This awareness and sensitivity are basically the result of an experience of the divine in the nature, and it is the first religious awakening in a human person which we may call the "nature religion". Although it is the most primordial tradition of the humankind, of late a renewed emphasis is being laid on this basic reality, by which people all over the world seek to get back to the nature as their primordial home, where they want to be at home, and from which they try to reap the harmony of life. The ecological crises currently in full swing on our planet earth have all generated a new interest in the old nature mysticism, namely, a mystical vision that invites the humans to look at this earth from a divine perspective. The negative results of the industrial revolution and the destruction

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<sup>1</sup>*Gitanjali*, XLIV

<sup>2</sup>*Gitanjali*, LVIII

of nature have all reawakened a passion for the wilderness consciousness, nature mysticism and the values of the fresh, unmolested beauty of the earth in its natural state.

Here a word must be added to our understanding of spirituality as such. Spirituality is the spirit-dimensional and spirit-guided, value-based and value-oriented life of all human persons, through which the totality of human life is seen and evaluated in and from a God-perspective. When persons regulate their entire life, thinking and activities in accordance with the higher ideals and values of life, accepted by the mind and applied to life by the will, the human spirit, which is the divine and innermost dimension of the human personality, opens itself to the divine realm to be inspired and guided by the divine Spirit. The diversified articulations of this spirit-guided life are what we have to understand as the effect and influence of spirituality in human life. Hence spirituality influences the entire life of the human person, not only certain specified moments of life. As a result, spirituality is something that is to be exercised right in the heart of the world. Spiritual persons try to find the solution for their problems not in the premises and criteria that are available to them from the secular world around and from the media we come into contact with, but from the values and principles which are derived from beyond the immediate human reach. Human sciences such as psychology and counselling can help persons to a great extent in this discernment process. But the ultimate solutions to all human problems come from the beyond, from the realm of the spirit, from the Word from the Beyond. Hence we have to understand spirituality as something very concrete and within the reach of all persons.

#### *The Emergence of Eco-Concerns in our Times*

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by an ecological movement both in the political as well as the secular world. It had its repercussions also in theological thinking with its eco-spiritual dimensions and style of life, loving and respecting the nature. This was all the aftermath of the ecological crises created by the misuse and abuse of science and technology. It must also be honestly stated that a wrong understanding of the biblical statement in the creation story of the human species was partly responsible for the desecration of the nature. What the Priestly writer wrote about the human task as "subduing" and "exercising dominion" over the creation through the two Hebrew verbs *rādā* and *kābaš* was mistaken through the centuries

for a ruthless and irresponsible domination and destruction of the creation under the banner of progress and civilization. The colonial mindset of the Christian West was a convenient weapon for these atrocities and there was no one to challenge or question it. In fact, the inner meaning of the divine command was one of stewardship, protection and care. This fact becomes clear from the Yahwist account of the creation of Eden, where Adam is placed to “till the garden and to keep the garden” (Gen 2:15). These two verbs indicate the responsibility of the human species to work in the creation and also to protect it lest it is deprived of its divine beauty. But the long history of the exploitation of the creation kept on growing until a stage was reached when the political and the intellectual world woke up to realize that things have gone wrong, that something has to be done in order to save the earth and the humankind.

Even as the world leaders and activists were involved in finding ways and means for redeeming this creation with political and practical agenda, in 1979 the late Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis of Assisi as the patron of ecology. The Pope cited the saint for being “an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. “St. Francis,” he added, “invited all creation—animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon— to give honour and praise to the Lord.” The bishops of the United States published a document in 1992 entitled *Renewing the Earth*, and in it they praised St. Francis while reminding their readers: “Safeguarding creation requires us to live responsibly in it, rather than managing creation as though we are outside it.” “We should see ourselves,” they added, “as stewards within creation, not as separated from it. Francis was ahead of his time. He saw himself, like today’s environmentalists, as part of the ecosystem, not as a proud master over and above it.” St. Francis of Assisi addressed creatures as “sisters” and “brothers,” that is, as equals, not as subjects to be dominated. He truly saw himself as a simple servant and caretaker of creation, a little brother to the birds and the fish and the lowly ivy.

Starting with the Rio Summit in June 1992, known as the Earth Summit, and having an annual Earth Day on April 22, the humankind is now time and again reminded of its delicate and vulnerable existence on the planet earth in the context of ongoing ecological crises. The latest attempt of the world body to arrive at a meaningful agreement on this crucial issue in Copenhagen back in

December 2009 also did not have the desired result. Without going to the merits and demerits of these efforts, we are going to have a new look, through which we can initiate a new awareness of ecological issues. As part of this movement we have the beginnings of an eco-spirituality which tries to seek and find God not only in prayer, in the study of the sacred scripture, in the participation in the sacraments and in loving service to the neighbour, but also in encountering the creation, by reverencing life in all its diversity as reflections of an all-wise and loving creator. Here both ecology and spirituality deal with a common reality, namely, the material cosmos (*ktisis*), the world where humanity dwells together with all the animals and plants. No one can escape the fact of being situated in this world in its physical, material reality. The living human spirit is always enfleshed in a material body, always a being in the world, with other beings, all interacting and interdependent. Together with this there arose also a political will among the nations not to destroy the earth in the name of development and a personal will among the people to avoid consumerism and greed.

This challenge of eco-spirituality was very soon taken up by the emerging biblical spirituality, which was sponsored and promoted by the newly developed biblical movement from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century insofar as the ecological dimensions of our created universe spread out in the Bible were accepted as the dynamic framework of a meaningful spirituality. What the scientists, astronomers and astronauts were hinting at as they were studying and observing the vastness and the mystery of the cosmos, theologians began to articulate from their faith perspective. They maintained that our environment, both human and non-human, channel divinity to us, because in every creature we can encounter in some way the creator. The humans, insofar as they are embodied spirits, are able to reach out beyond all material things towards God who is pure spirit and pure being. God is the greatest *Beyond* and at the same time the deepest *Immanent*. This is the typical "creature feeling" which Rudolf Otto has developed in his book *Idea of the Holy*, as characterized by the awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery. God is the greatest *Beyond* who, paradoxically, dwells within the world. Some have compared God with an infinite circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. God is more intimately present to every creature than the creature is to itself.

Hence, theologians started understanding creation as a sacrament, a visible sign of the invisible divine presence. The whole creation mediates and expresses something of the mystery of God to those who can read these signs. The creature in whom the sacramentality of creation is most evident is the human person. Humans bear the most unmistakable imprint of the transcendent creator in their ability to think creatively, to love unselfishly and to choose freely. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation of divinity in human nature reveals the full potentiality of our nature as radically open to the possibility of divinization. According to the principle of sacramentality, not only the human beings but everything that exists has its own inner meaning, beauty and value, its own indispensable part to play in the drama of the unfolding universe. Each reality participates in its own way in the transcendent mystery of being that dwells within it. Everything deserves to be revered for what it is in itself and for what it potentially reveals about God as a sacrament of the divine presence. Each creature is a unique manifestation of the creator, a sacrament of the invisible God. This sacramental nature of the creation makes it necessary that we develop a “sense of the sacred” in dealing with the created things. It is an inbuilt sense in all humans and it needs to be awakened and nurtured. This sense cannot be nurtured through consumerist habits characteristic of our times, habits of acquiring, using up and discarding. People get used to things and they take things for granted and thereby they lose the sense of the sacred, which is indispensable for cultivating an eco-spirituality.

Genuine biblical spirituality encourages eco-spirituality insofar as the Bible is all about a God who entered into human history through his creative and liberating presence and continues to be active in this world. Starting with the first faith statement about a God who created everything (Gen 1:1), the Bible deals with the story of the God-with-us till the completion of history, when God would at last make his dwelling place with the entire humankind in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1-5). This is not to be understood in pure apocalyptic but in realistic terms insofar as the humankind is a responsible agent in making this world a new reality capable of constituting and maintaining the human and the divine community. The stages of this divine involvement in human history are narrated with extreme care in the Bible insofar as God is presented as involved in every major event of human history until his decisive and

definitive involvement in the incarnation of the Son of God, which reaches its climax in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, thus giving a final proof and confirmation to the humankind that matter is not destined to destruction but to transformation. Hence the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a proleptic event sealing the destiny of the material creation. This 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. In the same way as biblical spirituality is basically a spirituality of joy and praise, based on the awareness of God-with-us, eco-spirituality is also one characterized by joy, praise and thanksgiving.

#### *Major Eco-Spiritual Reflections in the Old Testament*

The Old Testament begins its eco-spiritual reflection through a profound faith statement, when the Priestly writer writes: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). This awareness of God-centeredness radically transformed the Hebrew thinking in such a way that we come across several challenging thoughts and practices recorded in the various books of the Old Testament, which bring to light the fact that its eco-spiritual reflections are not only some pious spiritual reflections but also certain realistic demands which are worthy of our admiration and emulation. These demanding directives present before us Israel as a community which was basically open to God and also committed to a life of radical options in their social behaviour and interpersonal relationships. When the Priestly and the Yahwist writers refer to the basic mission of the humankind as exercising dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26) and tilling and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15), they are thereby hinting at a principle of involvement and transcendence the humankind is expected to have in order to maintain the divine image and likeness imparted to it (Gen 1:27) through the gift of the divine breath (Gen 2:7). Consonant with this lofty idea about the human reality and the human task in this created universe we see in the various books of the Old Testament a series of eco-spiritual directives and practices, which constitute some powerful thoughts which can serve as the basis for the radical transformation of our society. The first among them is the theology of the Sabbath rest developed in the Old Testament. Israel understood its Sabbath rest basically as a participation in God's rest through which he completed his work (Gen 2:2), and this cosmic event was the

theological basis for Israel's rest, which should teach them how after they had worked for six days they had to transcend their work and belong to the realm of God's rest (Ex 20:8-10). The accent on Sabbath rest was not so much on the physical rest as a cessation from work; but rather on the inner message the Sabbath had of training the people to see their work not as their ultimate mission in this world. It was all a theology of involvement and transcendence, a theology of affirmation, negation and transcendence.

Based on this biblical tradition of the weekly Sabbath we see also in various books of the Pentateuch the evolution of the sabbatical year (Ex 23:10-11; Deut 15:1-3; Lev 25:2-8) as well as the Jubilee year (Lev 25:8-17; 29-31), which were also understood in profound theological and humanitarian terms. Alienation of family property and the development of lending at interest led to the growth of pauperism and the enslavement of defaulting debtors and their dependents. This destroyed that social equality which had existed at the time of the tribal federation and it still remained as an ideal. The regulation regarding the sabbatical year was that the land should not be cultivated, but had to lie fallow. Like humans and animals, the land also was to have a sabbatical rest. God pledged his extra blessings during the sixth year, the produce of which would enable them to go through the year of the fallow and also the following year till the harvest (Lev 25:18-22). The law of the Sabbatical Year in Deuteronomy directed that debts should be remitted after seven years. The grand sabbatical year, known as the Jubilee Year, was celebrated every fiftieth year. The year was to begin on the Day of Atonement and was a period of emancipation in which all alienated property was to be returned to its original owner (Lev 25:10-13). The Jubilee Year was supposed to be the basis of a periodic rehabilitation so that all can live in dignity as the people of God. On the whole, the picture given here of the socio-economic organization of Israel was something unique and magnificent.

We do not know how far these prescriptions were put into practice. But its spirit of appreciation for personal rights and human dignity synthesizes much of Old Testament teaching and it is a great message also for our times. The underlying reason for these provisions in the Old Testament was this: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine: with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev 25:23). The Psalmist also had his conviction recorded: "The earth is the



Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps 24:1). In fact, these lofty thoughts of the Old Testament should serve as a caveat for our contemporary trends in globalization where greed is the controlling factor, where the humans are made use of as a commodity and are not treated and respected as persons. This is particularly true about the vast Asian continent. Many of its sections were labelled as the Third World for several centuries by those who were plundering these lands and their people under the label of colonialism and colonial mission. In fact, all these were basically atrocities meted out to the less privileged on this planet by those who claimed themselves to be messengers of the good news of God. At the same time, we will have to see below how these countries of the Asian continent have a rich variety of eco-spirituality which compels them to have a new look at these unique contributions. Before we come to that we need to have a look at the profound eco-spiritual reflections of Paul who has contributed some of the most original contributions of eco-spirituality we come across in the Sacred Scripture.

#### *Pauline Eco-Spiritual Contributions*

Paul is the most important New Testament theologian who has profoundly dwelt on the ecological and Christological dimensions of the material creation (*ktisis*) from the perspective of the death and resurrection of Christ. Whereas Judaism speculated on the passing away of this era (*hōlam hazzeh*) and the inauguration of a new era (*hōlam habba*) insofar as the present world was evil in itself, Paul spoke about the definitive transformation of this material creation as a consequence of the resurrection of Christ. In his letter to the Romans Paul analyzes at length the operation of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in the life of the Christians (Rom 8:5-17) and also in the destiny of the material creation (Rom 8:18-24). The resurrection of Christ is, for Paul, a proleptic event insofar as it anticipates and guarantees the final transformation and glorification of the entire material creation. It is a spirituality which invites the humans to look forward to the fullness of time (*plērōma tou kairos*) when all things will be brought to Christ as the Head (*anakephaliosasthai ta panta en to Christo*) (Eph 1:10). This Pauline approach to the transformation and glorification of the material creation as an application of biblical eco-spirituality has its own uniqueness which needs to be analyzed along well-established Pauline theological principles. The most important

among them is the principle of glory through suffering, life through death. For Paul, suffering is the note of every life; but it is also a condition for glorification, not a meritorious condition, but the necessary pathway, for it is unavoidable in view of what the world is. That is why Paul could say that a comparison between suffering and future glory is not possible.

In order to explain the meaning of suffering in view of glory Paul brings in the prevailing picture of the material creation (*ktisis*) as one characterized by suffering. The human state of suffering has something in common with the suffering of the material creation as a whole. In fact, it is nothing short of a universal law that suffering marks the road to glory. All sufferings, all imperfections, all the unsatisfied aspirations and longings, of which the traces are so abundant in external nature as well as in the human nature, do but point forward to a time when the suffering shall cease, the imperfection removed and the frustrated aspirations at last crowned and satisfied. This time coincides with the glorious consummation which awaits the humankind. In this process the humankind and creation have to encourage each other. The creation encourages the humankind insofar as it unfolds itself before it as something into which God has instilled hope, a hope that it will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:21). The humankind gives courage and hope to the creation because in it the creation is privileged to see the beginning of a transformation and glorification, in as much as it has the first fruits (*aparchē*) of the Spirit in it, a guarantee of the inheritance that is to come (Rom 8:23). In the midst of this high expectation Paul sees the creation engaged in a chorus of groaning. Before the final glory is revealed the creation suffers like a woman who bears a child. In fact, the image suggests the preparation for a great joy, for the emergence of something altogether new through the crisis of acute and liberating sufferings. But faith alone can discern in these phenomena the secret movement which is directing things towards a transcendent goal.

If our modern knowledge of the material world yields a very different framework of thought regarding the future of the world and of the planet earth, it matters little, provided that the essential arguments of Paul are discerned and assimilated. The purpose of Paul was to remind his readers of the solidarity binding together the creature and the creation which the book of Genesis in its own way

had already affirmed. We may not agree with Paul in our mode of grasping and assessing this solidarity. But fact itself cannot be denied, and faith recognizes in this the Creator's will and thus a responsibility for the humankind. Here faith affirms that both sin and redemption have far-reaching consequences for creation as a whole. The exclusively religious message of this passage cannot be tampered with in any attempt of demythologizing the ancient world view. The movement which draws all creation and the humankind as the crown of creation towards their intrinsic ends is realizing the plan of God. No obstacle offered by history will be able to check the work of the redemptive re-creation undertaken by Christ and carried out through his Spirit. Neither the corruptibility of the world and of the 'outward' person nor the weakness of the 'inward' person will prevent God from fulfilling his plan. It is God who is in active control of things and not that things eventually straighten themselves out. He guides them, not with the object of assuring the petty happiness of the pleasure-seeking people but the object of attaining that salvation and glorification which will be the crown of his work.

#### *The Challenge of Eco-Spirituality in the Asian Context*

It is against the background of these rich and complex contributions of the Old and New Testaments related to eco-spiritual reflections that we now turn our attention to the Asian continent. That the Asian continent has a unique place in the global spiritual, theological, economic and sociological scenario is becoming clearer. In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, published in 1998, the late Pope John Paul II had also invited Asian theologians and philosophers to engage themselves in a re-articulation of the Christian gospel in the Asian context.

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India, particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind. The first of these is the

*universality of the human spirit* (italics mine), whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Never before has any other Pope written in so beautiful terms the richness of the Eastern philosophical and theological traditions. The Pope has thereby invited Asian theologians to take up the challenge of articulating biblical and theological concepts giving due respect to Asian thought patterns, and also taking into account Asia's rich religious and cultural heritage. It is in these encouraging circumstances for the development of an Asian theology and spirituality that we are proposing 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. We try to see the rich contributions of eco-spirituality in these Asian religions.

Asia is ironically the most variegated and vulnerable region of the earth with regard to its geographical, religious, climatic, ethnic, cultural, economic and environmental complexity. Spread over a very large area on the surface of the earth, with its diversified climatic conditions, Asian countries have to face a series of challenges to cope up with the various demands of their complex situation. Ethnically and culturally also Asia is a very much diversified continent. The phenomenon of the less-privileged and dehumanized *Dalits* and women dispossessed of their legitimate share in the resources of the world is a stark reality of Asia and it calls for an ethical response. A major characteristic of Asia is its religious pluralism. Practically all the major religions of the world co-exist in Asia more or less in a spirit of harmony and mutuality. According to many theologians Asia has the unique privilege of accommodating various religious traditions in this vast continent, almost all of them enjoying equal rights. This phenomenon makes it possible for all religions to have an open mind towards each other, and this prepares the way for the cooperation of all religions to establish a prosperous society. This is very much different from the situation where only one religion exists and predominates, because there that one religion monopolizes and controls the whole structure. The presence of many religions with their different philosophies and theologies facilitates a kind of mutual fecundation and corrective criticism, as a result of which a sound and healthy society can gradually emerge. The main condition is that

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<sup>3</sup>*Fides et Ratio*, 72.

these religions have to be tolerant towards each other and be ready to co-operate among themselves.

Moreover, the still unaccomplished social and economic equality in Asia presents a challenging situation for all these religions to engage themselves in an urgent struggle towards creating a just society, conscientizing both the Asian and the international community about the need of a radical change in the established structures of the Asian society. They have to use a common language and evolve a common policy for action. The services of sociologists, theologians and anthropologists are all to be pooled together in organizing this struggle. The major religions of Asia have also to undergo a process of *tapas*, a process of interior warming up, by which to identify the inner essence of these religions and become more tolerant, more open-minded and more co-operative among themselves. It is true that we have passed through the stages of intolerance and hatred among religions. In some quarters there has developed a closer understanding among religions, which tries to establish a principle of complementary thinking, according to which each religion shows its readiness to be purified and perfected through its association with other religions. It is from this perspective that we try to see the richness of the main Asian religions with regard to their eco-spiritual contributions. This is an area in which Asian religions can come closer and give a message of mutual recognition and appreciation. At this stage of eco-spiritual reflection Asian religions remain at their simplest form and it is here that they can give a healthy and enriching message to the entire world.

#### *Eco-Spiritual Dimensions in the Asian World Religions*

The blessing and burden of any Christian theological study in Asia is that it is to be carried out in the context of Asia's religious pluralism. This is a characteristic of Asian religiosity. It is a blessing insofar as the Christians feel related to and enriched by the valid insights of their partners in faith, which sometimes can correct the Christian understanding of some traditionally inherited concepts. At the same time, it is also a burden in the sense that the Christians need to open their eyes to see beyond their own established ways of thinking, which they thought were normative for all issues, the other religions having only some imperfect ideas which had to be corrected and perfected through the Christian understanding. It is high time for the Christians to put an end to this superiority attitude and assume the

role of the "little flock" in their theological reflection. Ecological thinking and living are characteristic of many organized world religions as well as primitive religions in the Asian countries. A quick review of some of these religions will reveal the depth of eco-awareness the followers of these religions have in their day-to-day life.

a) *Hinduism*: For Hinduism the earth is goddess and mother. Mother earth is the provider, and therefore she is to be protected. According to Hinduism, the supreme God created the world by making self-sacrifice. Since there was no matter out of which the world could be created, God dismembered himself and with it he created the various realities of the world. Hence the cosmos and everything in it come from the divine creator, and therefore there is a divine element in all creatures. In a collection of books known as *Aranyakas*, there is a description of trees and forests as sacred realities. As part of this theistic approach to the world, we have the well-known doctrine of *ahimsa*, a doctrine based on the respect for life. *Ahimsa* is the quality of a person who is enlightened. Manu, the famous lawgiver, prescribed several laws concerning kindness to all living beings, including plants. *Bhagavatgita* also presents *ahimsa* as the greatest of virtues. Modern Hindu leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave were very much conscious of the importance of environmental protection and they wrote about the need of protecting the environment. Gandhiji's life style of simplicity was also motivated by his eco-awareness.

b) *Islam*: Islam is a religion which gives much importance to the nature and to its protection. It teaches that all living beings are God's creatures. The earth is not the monopoly of the humans; all living beings have got a right to live on this earth. The non-living beings praise God by their very existence, whereas human beings many a time fail to give praise to God. According to Islam, killing of animals without justifiable cause is one of the seven deadly sins. The spirit of respect and compassion to the nature and its creatures is seen in contemporary writings of Islam, such as the "Muslim Declaration on Nature":

Protection, conservation and development of the environment and natural resources is a mandatory religious duty to which every Muslim should be committed..... Man should not abuse, misuse, or distort the natural resources, as each generation is entitled to benefit from them, but is not entitled to own them permanently.... Nor

should they use natural resources irrationally or in such a way as to destroy living resources or spoil their habitats and food bases.<sup>4</sup>

Islam condemns all kinds of atrocities towards nature and demands its faithful to be the stewards of this created world by helping the nature and the creatures therein to grow and develop. Since it is a religion that had its origin in the desert area, it is very much conscious of the need of environmental protection.

c) *Jainism and respect for life*: Of all the world religions, no one is stricter in its commitment to avoid harming living beings than Jainism. The Jains have accepted a life which is intended to avoid killing any form of life. Since the ultimate goal of life is *mokhsa*, it is to be attained by means of practising *ahimsa*, and thereby purifying the soul. Though the Jains constitute only a rather small community in the Asian scene, they have made a significant contribution to the environmental protection. Dr. R.K. Punshi once said: "All that breathe are precious. Who is to say that the suffering of a sparrow is less worthy of solace than the pain of a human person? The spark of life is no dimmer simply because it is encased in fur or feather". The Jains teach us a lesson about how we have to respect life because it is a gift of God.

d) *Buddhism and Environmental Awareness*: Buddhism, like Hinduism and Jainism, has as its main tenet in the doctrine of *ahimsa*, which is not only non-violence to other living beings, but also compassion towards all creatures. It means to extend loving kindness to all beings; it also means that we should relieve the sufferings of other beings as much as we can. Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion extended to all living beings. Like human beings, all living beings are sensitive to happiness and suffering. They, too, just like human species, primarily seek happiness and shun suffering. According to Buddhism, the fact that non-human beings are incapable of communicating their feelings is no more an indication of apathy or insensibility to suffering or happiness on their part than in the case of a person whose faculty of speech is impaired. Buddhism believes that all life forms are interrelated and is part of a much larger life-force. So to do harm to any part of this reality is to harm one's own self. In reality there is only one life force in the universe. All of us are a part of this great Life Force. Whenever we cause suffering to any other living being, we

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/THE%20ASSISI%20DECLARATIONS.pdf>

are causing suffering to this great Life Force. There is nothing that we do that affects only ourselves. The entire universe is helped by our acts of compassion but is harmed by our acts of violence and lack of kindness.

What these great religions have maintained in the past and are still trying to hold on have been greatly impaired by the unbridled influence of consumerism assisted by the impact of science and technology. At one stage of the explosion of knowledge gained from science and technology Christian theologians had tried to laugh away the “simplistic and unscientific” ideas of these so-called “Non-Christian religions”!<sup>5</sup> But now we are at a stage of history when these same Christian theologians feel the need of being once again born in the cradle of nature to experience the simple and salutary reality of our communion with the nature, something which our brothers and sisters of other faiths have convincingly established during the past centuries and are still practicing. In this exodus towards the nature we once again find that the Bible, the source of Christian spirituality, also opens before us a universe which God created in the beginning and entrusted to the humankind to be its steward and trustee. The various dimensions of this biblical understanding of the nature around us are a rich source for improving the quality of Christian spirituality.

#### *New Developments in Eco-Spirituality*

The created universe, particularly the planet earth, is the *oikos* (home) for the whole humankind. Out of a profound love and reverence for this primary home we have to develop a spiritual outlook which should constantly guide our day-to-day life and activities. It is a creation-centred spirituality. In fact, the universe, the nature and the various forms of life all around us transmit to us the mystery of God. Our sense of the Absolute is derived from our experience of creation’s vast splendour. The earth is the matrix of our life and health, as well as the medium of all our higher values. It is also the mother of our higher existence just as much as it is our sustainer in biological terms. Consequently the humankind must become the servant of the earth’s

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<sup>5</sup>It is high time for the Church and her theologians to discontinue the use of the expression “Non-Christians”, as if being a Christian is the normal and accepted reality of being in this world. It is all the more so in the Asian context where the Christians continue to exist in a land of religious pluralism. It is gratifying that a change of perspective is emerging in many quarters.



protection, the guardian of a viable earth process. Thomas Berry, an American Passionist, (1914-2009) had emerged during the past as one of the great prophets of eco-spirituality. The practical need to change direction on our planet, to spark a revolution in our thinking about the earth before it is too late, was the radical focus of Berry's efforts. He became famous for proposing that a deep understanding of the history and functioning of the evolving universe is a necessary inspiration and guide for our own effective functioning as individuals and as a species. He is considered a leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the great eco-theologian and eco-mystic. According to Thomas Berry, Christian spirituality and the spirituality of the other world religions do not meet the new situation adequately, nor account for the sacred character of the universe. They do not see the humans as part of the cosmic process, but transcendent to it. They defend a position of the humans as separated and so alienated from the natural environment. They look for a paradise in another world, instead of finding its roots here in the creation. Berry advocated an eco-based spirituality, one that is grounded on the inner reality of the cosmos itself, the cosmos as revelatory of the divine presence. He based this spirituality on the monumental fact of the universe event, the expansion, unfolding and evolution of the entire cosmos from its primordial origin some fifteen millions years ago.

It is refreshing and heartening for all of us to realize that eco-spirituality can restore the dignity of the created order, saving the cosmos from being merely a convenience for the humankind and its barbaric exploitation and the destruction of the natural world for making the cosmos its consumer paradise. Eco-spirituality or creation-centred spirituality is the most important development in this century, for with it emerges the realization of the earth and the universe as the heart or focus of our intellectual, moral, aesthetic, practical and spiritual life. Eco-spirituality is singularly significant insofar as it brings all religions closer and creates a link between them and it can have a central place in the heart of each of these religions, being a common dimension of spirituality.

#### *Eco-Spirituality and Secular Spirituality*

There is also a great deal of discussion today about the relationship of eco-spirituality and secular spirituality which is being proposed as a corrective to traditional devotional pieties and cultic spirituality.

Understanding spirituality as a reality at the depth level of the human persons, which invites them to positive and humanizing interactions with all things and people, secular spirituality is based on the positive challenge and meaning of the present temporal order. The basic tenet of secular spirituality is that it tries to see spirituality as this-worldly rather than as other-worldly, alienating humans from the realities and challenges of life upon this earth. In fact, a closer study of the world religions reveals that it is this sort of other-worldly spiritualities which organized religions have so far propagated, which is being progressively rejected by the modern secular humans. At the same time, it is to be noticed that the modern secular humans are not non-spiritual or anti-spiritual. What they want is a meaningful spirituality which enables them to face the challenges of life. By proposing a secular spirituality we do not mean at all that religion is irrelevant. In fact, religion is still a very potent force in the contemporary world. Right now we are passing through a phase of fundamentalist religious revival in almost all major organized religions. During the past few decades we have been also passing through a phase of the collapse of secular ideologies, such as in Eastern Europe, which gave encouragement to the various forms of fundamentalist religious alternatives, especially those secular ideologies which tried to destroy religion in the name of secularism. Some have calculated from all these happenings that at last the world is going to a religious way of thinking as the only viable alternative.

At the same time, we must admit that the whole world is undergoing an irreversible process of secularization. Whatever is the power and hold of the fundamentalist revival of religion in the modern world, religion, in its conventional and organized forms, is tending to have less and less control over the more reflective, rational, responsible and progressive sections of the society. What is at the heart of this secularization process is that humankind wants to be the master of its own destiny. It is true that this process needs a lot of maturing and deepening, and consequently a secular spirituality also must have deeper roots than it is understood today. It must be based on the sound principles of religion and it is here that eco-spirituality seems to illumine the secular humankind to have a deeper awareness of God in the secular world, guided as it is by God's all-permeating presence and action. The modern humankind becomes secular not in order to avoid and evade God, but in order to meet and experience God right in the heart of the cosmos.

But eco-spirituality and secular spirituality are not the solution to all the problems about spirituality in our times. There is more to spirituality than eco-spirituality and secular spirituality. We cannot ignore the demands of the inner life of the human person and the equally necessary task of transformation from all forms of self-centredness characteristic of all humans. It means self-denial and renunciation as well as the readiness not only to affirm but also to deny the world in order to transcend it and to be one with God. At the same time, eco-spirituality and secular spirituality are a corrective to the prevailing ritualistic and cultic spirituality which does not seem to influence life. Such spirituality is very often restricted to the walls of the temples, the church and the mosque. While cultic spirituality must influence and inspire eco-spirituality, the latter must broaden its horizons to embrace the whole world, because this universe is entrusted to the humankind which is created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).