

# ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Religious ecological care has emerged as an important aspect in the development of contemporary deep ecology and religious moral ethics and social care, challenging different religious traditions. Some religious thinkers try to re-examine, interpret and transform their religious traditions in order to better face the challenges of the ecological crisis. It is true that ethics and beliefs define the way humans process, interpret, understand, and find solutions for the hard questions of existence and life. In this context, the way humans approach and search for possible solutions to the hard-to-answer questions of ecological problems gains significant pertinence. This article investigates the ecological interface Christian religion as an example and uses deep ecology and similar views to explore the Christian perspective in the context of a new relationship between human and nature. In today's world, where human beings as a society are moving towards realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, religious ecological care takes prominence to understand the way human ethical values and beliefs affect the way we approach problems as serious as the ecological crisis, and to observe the concatenation between the People and Planet aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between people and nature and interpersonal relations are among the two most basic relationships formed by human beings in the process of transforming and developing themselves. Most human activities revolve around these two relations (Oakley 769). These two relations are unique as each has its own scope, while simultaneously influencing and restricting each other. But the relationship between people and nature is more fundamental, and the relationships among human beings are derived as the development of complex interpersonal relationships is based on the relationship between humans and nature (McDuffie 244; Florio 240). The ecological issues of today emerge as the remnants and result of our failure to properly handle these two basic relations, especially the relationship between humans and nature (Schweiker 483; Gareiou and Zervas 266).

Ecological problems have become a global serious concern at present. Many people think that this is a purely scientific problem, because it only means a global survival problem (Ayres 60; Ray 15). The authors who focus on ecological issues are mostly biologists, economists, and policy analysts rather than philosophers and theologians (Peng et al. 9; Quan 11; Yu 8). However, the ecological problem is not just a scientific problem or a problem of wealth distribution and social injustice. It is more like a deep-seated worldview problem and a religious problem (Keller 810; Koertner 3; Barlow and Dowd 70).

The word 'ecology' originally referred to balance, harmony, and interconnectivity of living things in a specific environment. Later, it was applied to the overall study of people in different environments. In its broadest sense, the word refers to the study of everything on the earth (Gnanankan 3). The contemporary 'ecological crisis' refers to the problems that arise from the nature and understanding of our relationship to other things on the planet. This problem does not mean that we have to return to the rural lifestyles and traditions of the past, or forget the knowledge we have gained through modern science to solve present problems. The key question to solve the ecological crisis is to rethink and understand our relationship with

nature and the things in it, or in a different sense, what our evolving relationship with nature should concern and establish. Mcdonagh believes that in the search for this new relationship, religion must play an important role. This will allow us to regain the kind of respect our predecessors had for the natural world (Mcdonagh 10).

An ecological turn in philosophy, culture, and moral consciousness has emerged in the Western society over the past few decades. Religious circles had discussed environmental ethics since the 1960s, and some scholars even use 'greening of religion' to describe this development. In the religious world, environmental protection has become a serious ethical concern for different religious traditions, where many religious people try to review and reconstruct their religious traditions under the light of ecological care. Environmental protection concerns have caused some Western scholars to question and even dislike traditional Western religions, turning to interest in Eastern religions, which forms a 'Green Orientalism' (Lohmann 202). They try to reinterpret Asian religious traditions, and call for the ecological Wisdom, such as attaching importance to the unity of human and nature, advocating not to have animal sacrifices, and emphasizing on compassion for all sentient beings. Some Western environmental philosophers even believe that Asian religions and philosophical traditions can provide important resources worthy of reference to make up for the deficiencies of the Western traditions (Callicott and Ames 15). Some religious scholars, such as Paul Knitter, are actively advocating that inter-religious dialogue should take the ecological crisis as the main topic, the basic orientation (Knitter 7). In addition, ecological issues have also become one of the main topics of the dialogue between religion and natural sciences. Many introductory books on religion and natural sciences are specially designed to discuss ecological issues (Haught 23; Southgate 56).

In this context of religious ecological care, it can be seen that ecological relationship often becomes a critically important part of Christian theology, and there are many discussions about this relationship in the *Bible*. Therefore, in the human search for this new relationship, it would be interesting to see the role played by Christian theology. Past theology did not lack thinking and discussion on the role of human beings, but many discussions treated people as moral or religious people, and lacked attention to

the human roles in the secular world. However, in the real world, people are often religious, social, economic, and political at the same time. People play a complex of various roles. What the ecological problem needs is to put people in this larger context and consider the problem in a larger network of relationships. In the development of contemporary moral consciousness and social care, ethical care for the ecological environment can be said to be an important part of it, and religion would have to play a substantial role in elucidating this ethical care.

As mentioned before, different scholars have given different explanations of the root cause of the ecological crisis. Some blame it on the creation theory of Jewish-Christian tradition, and some think it is related to the 'de-sanctification' in the later development of Christianity. Despite these questions laid against the Western religions, specifically Christianity, the ecological crisis is closely connected with the material needs for human survival and development. Surely, it seems obvious and beyond doubt that our present problems and crises cannot have stemmed from a singular reason in human history. Our present ecological crisis is the result of our incessant and excessive demands from nature, which have exceeded the amount of disposable resources on earth. Apart from these considerations, there are various viewpoints to the relationship between people and nature in the traditional Christian faith, which have become the basis for its construction of ecological theology.

There are two basic views regarding the relationship between people and nature: the model of humans managing nature and the model of equality of humans and nature. Around these two views, Christian ecological theology has developed two basic approaches: human-centred and ecology-centred. The human-centred perspective understands human beings as the managers or guardians of nature under the authority of God, and not the real masters of nature. This approach emphasizes the responsibility of human to nature, but always takes the human interests as the ultimate return. This stance fails to emphasize the self-control ability of human, and ignores human's dependence on nature. "The idea that man stands outside nature and exercises a right to rule the natural world fairly has become a prominent feature of the ethical consciousness that governs Western civilization. For the thought of controlling nature, there is no more important source than this"

(Leiss 28). Ecology-centre focuses on that it is necessary to abandon the human-centred world outlook and values, and emphasize equal inherent value of all lives, so as to completely overcome ecological crises. These two different approaches were also prevalent throughout human history, since the beginning of Christian faith. Despite their prevalence, the human-centred perspective was much rooted and widespread since the middle ages, and has slowly lost its roots in the popular consciousness. While the ecology-centred perspective, has taken the centre stage and gained much attention in the recent times, significantly after the nineteenth century.

On the basis of reviewing and analysing these two approaches, some scholars realized that discussions about the relationship between human and nature in the context of Christianity will be concerned with God's involvement in the world and the relationship between God and the world, and a third approach was developed, that is, centred on God. Starting from God, the relationship between God and nature is clarified to locate the relationship between human and nature, in order to explore a way out for the ecological crisis faced by humankind. In the face of the global ecological crisis, Christianity is determined to reflect on its past, and re-discuss the relationship between human and nature. The search for a way out for human ecology from the perspective of cultural values will undoubtedly have a great inspiration to us.

This article points out that religion and ecological care share a complementary relationship. The focus on ecological issues has had a significant and widespread impact on the religious community, especially in the field of religious ethics. At the same time, the focus on ecology has also prompted people to discover that the ecological crisis is not just a question of science and technology, legislation, and economic systems, but also involves spiritual dimensions, and can even be said to be a religious issue (Hull 36; Rockefeller and Elder 58).

The paper takes Christian religion as an example to illustrate the ecological shift from the perspective of deep ecology, points out the religious dimension of environmental protection. It uses the views of different theologians and scholars to reflect the great awakening of contemporary Christian ecological consciousness. Such tremendous changes obviously originate from the serious ecological crisis and further influence on the SDGs in turn. This ecological shift also helps

to develop, evolve and change the views and beliefs of people, thereby illuminating the connection between the Planet and People aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals. Pope Francis emphasizes on this relation in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, saying: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (104). The People and Planet aspects are interconnected in today's world with limited resources, overpopulation, and increasing chasm between the rich and poor.

## **2. The Awakening of Christian Ecological Consciousness**

The Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx raised two fundamental questions about the beliefs of contemporary people: First, in today's world, "how does a Christian who believes in the Kingdom of God ... understand the information of modern society" and how to make "this contemporary, brand-new interpretation" consistent with the Christian tradition? Second, since there are various "religious and non-religious interpretations of the world and life," how does a Christian "use modern thinking (or at least recognize the legal requirements of modern thought), to defend for Christian interpretation" (Schillebeeckx 5-6)? In Schillebeeckx's view, if such problems cannot be confronted directly, all new theories are nothing more than "to embellish existing theology with some socially critical factors," or "at best it is just a pious inference from past theological theories" (Schillebeeckx 5-6). The same is true of concerns about ecological issues.

From a traditional religious point of view, criticizing the alienation of human from nature, human's aggression against nature, human's destruction of the environment, etc., although may be not meaningless, is not necessarily justified. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed,

Mixing the truth of Christianity with the dogma of another era, ... irrelevant proverbs to solve the social confusion in a complex civilized system, ... only concerned about the violation of the Sabbath prohibition or Puritanism, ... The purpose is only to maintain the minutiae of social and ethical norms. Perhaps these

minutiae had orthodox or occasional dignity in a certain period in the past: but today, both the orthodox dignity and the dignity acquired by chance have lost their religious and ethical significance (Niebuhr 1-2).

According to Niebuhr, some traditional Christian doctrine will be consistent with the needs of the era, the same as the relationship between human and nature. Heinrich Ott described the future of the world: "Nuclear threats, population expansion, environmental pollution, and resource depletion will all constitute the global crisis syndrome that human plunged into" (Ott 3-4). This sense of crisis garnered a lot of attention at the time. In addition, Lynn White Jr., a professor at the University of California, published an article entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in which he declared that Christianity should bear the ecological crisis responsibility (White 192). Because the traditional view of Christianity tends to be that people have control over nature. The biblical creation narrative seems to have this goal in mind: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1. 26). After the flood God said to the Noah: "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands" (Genesis 9.1-2). According to this view, man is the master of nature, and obviously higher than other lives. All creations are created by God to serve humankind. In this way, Christianity provide a reasonable basis for humankind to control and rule nature, and connive at the uncontrolled development and use of nature, resulting now in a tragedy for people and planet. This view immediately aroused widespread recognition among environmentalists, and the ecological theological movement that emerged in the 1960s marked the great awakening of contemporary Christian ecological consciousness.

In its essence White did criticize the underlying philosophies and attitudes of Christianity as the sole reason for the ecological crisis and the environmental problems, by saying "Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by

Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians” (White 1206). White criticised Christian attitudes and the underlying philosophies for the emergence of a science and technology that disregards its ecological responsibility. According to him, the Judeo-Christian creationism sees the relation between people and nature as a custodianship, where humans were given the power to manage and control nature. Under this ‘cover,’ humans can grab nature at any cost for their own benefit, and their arbitrary behaviour has led to the tragedy of human ecological crisis (White 1205). The New Testament describes the history of God’s entry into humankind through a series of events such as the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This historical drama is staged by God and people, and nature is only the background of this drama of cooperation between God and human. Nature is only the decoration, not the focus of people’s attention. After that, a series of teachings developed by Christianity, such as ‘incarnation,’ ‘justification by faith,’ and ‘trinity’; they all also refer to people and God, as for the relationship between God and nature or the relationship between people and nature are neglected throughout (White 1206).

Protestant schools responded differently to this accusation from White. Among them, the Protestant Evangelicals believe that it is too weak to trace the root of the ecological crisis to the guidance of Christian doctrine. If the relationship between human and nature promoted by the traditional Christian faith affects people’s attitudes towards nature, which leads to the current ecological crisis, it can be deduced that the ecological crisis only occurs in areas under the influence of Christian civilization, but in reality it is not that case. The evangelicals’ excuse is not to shirk responsibility of Christianity in the face of crisis, but to find the real problem in further investigation. Finally, they believe that Christianity should bear the ecological crisis not in its written doctrines and creeds, but in the common sinful nature of people, it is mainly caused by the greedy nature of people (White 1205).

Unlike the evangelicals, the more liberal people among the Protestants followed White’s analysis, and also believed that traditional Christian teachings should bear the main responsibility for the ecological crisis, especially the *Genesis* doctrine they promote (Keller 358). From the perspective of maintaining the Christian faith,

many people believe that the root cause of the crisis is not in the doctrine of Christian writing, but in its historical guidance. They also sought evidence from the records of the *Bible* and some theological books. They said that the description of *Genesis* before us clearly included the close relationship between God, nature, and people. On the sixth day, God created all things and human beings in the world, and then God granted the privilege of 'managing' the land and the creatures. God is the master of this world, and he moisturizes all things in the world. These liberals believe that the failure to pay attention to the relationship between human and nature is regarded as the responsibility of Christianity for the ecological crisis (Gregory 341).

Despite these debates, White's criticism and reasoning still fall short to fully establish that Christianity had anything to do with the present ecological concerns because of three main reasons. White's criticism is not about Christianity in itself but about certain attitudes and philosophies that underlie Christianity. It should also be considered that White was an expert in Medieval history, due to which the attitudes and philosophies that he condones in his work do not represent those of Christianity as a whole, but only from a certain specific time-period, that of the Middle Ages (Warde 47). According to Emily Warde, White uses his knowledge on the medieval technological advancements and the Christian thinking prevalent during that specific era to arrive a conclusion.

A second issue in White's claim is the fact that he entrusts the sole responsibility for the attitudes of the modern world towards nature on Christianity. Despite the convincing efficacy of this understanding, his analysis still brings forth only a uni-variable analysis. We have already seen that people play a complex variety of roles in their lives, and are not consumed by the religious aspect of their life. In this sense, it is true that the Christian attitudes prevalent during the Medieval period have influenced the way humans perceive and understand nature, but it also does not emerge as the singular reason behind the environmental crisis. The industrial revolution and the development of technology played crucial roles by letting market and economic policies to dictate the progress of the world. Our world today is entirely dependent and at the same time progresses, based on market policies and economic gain. The industrial revolution was a singular point where we not only

dissociated ourselves from nature, but also from fellow human beings. The period is defined by its persistent lament on the degradation of society, which constantly realized the cessation of individuality. The Christian doctrines, on the other hand, have always focused on the individuality of a person, on one's actions. White also acknowledges the role industrial revolution, scientific and technological development, and economic policies played to bring forth the ecological concerns that we face today. White briefly criticizes the industrial revolution by commenting:

The emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature can scarcely be dated before about 1850, save in the chemical industries, where it is anticipated in the 18th century. Its acceptance as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture... (White, 1203).

It is also important to understand that despite these reasons there are other reasons such as the human desire, exceeding demands, and greed that are much integral to humanity, and far older than any religion or society.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that White severely refutes the claim of traditional Christianity that humans manage nature, and he believes that humankind has looted nature in the name of "housekeeper of the nature". Despite these questions, White's understanding provides only a partial understanding of the actual reasons, and focuses on a single variable in the equation that has led to the present ecological crisis.

The biblical vision of the world understands humans to be the caretakers and guardians of the world. Though human beings are God's creation like the surrounding natural things, human beings are created in the image of God, and are endowed with reflective reason, free will and immortal soul. Based on this, God gave the human power to govern this place and manage animals (Kochappilly 347). As managers, human beings are only authorized to manage, but not to own, and even have no right to dispose at will. God endows people with emotion and reason, and people should rely on these gifts when they perform the duties of managing. And behind the judgment of emotional and rational choices should also bear a certain responsibility, this responsibility is the responsibility as a

manager. Human beings were to live and be faithful to God and his world. Land and resources were not meant for the excessiveness, but were understood as the way to reach and connect with the divine (Nandhikkara 399). As a steward of God, human beings must clearly realize that they do not have the right to rule over this nature, and they must not arbitrarily damage the nature or control everything created by God. This realization and a sense of responsibility necessitated in our current situation, where we are working towards the Sustainable Development Goals. It is specifically when we judiciously and ethically feel responsible for nature and the environment in which we live, that humans can truly achieve a harmony between the Planet and People aspects of Sustainable Development Goals.

### **3. The Corresponding Reflection on Christian Theology**

White's article is regarded as a 'first shot' at the start of a race, which, later triggered a movement to reassess and reshape Christianity. With or without White's explosive remarks, it will eventually raise a fundamental question about the Christian beliefs and practices and ecology (Scharper 15). It is time for Christianity to make its own response to ecological problems, to show its position. The environmentalist and theologian, Ken Gnanankan, believes that an issue for such a response stems from the Christian understanding of spiritual or spiritual issues as otherworldly. Gnanankan believes that the first reason why Christianity has to reflect is that people need to change their indifference to ecological crisis (Gnanankan 93). And secondly theologians need to defend Christian world views against the accusations of Christianity about ecology and provide better explanations. If the traditional Christian view of the relationship between human and nature is 'people-centred,' then a 'biology-centred' view is needed now (Gnanankan 4). Gnanankan believes that this view will advance non-human welfare including animals and plants in the nature. The 'biology-centred' viewpoint will prompt us to value each creature, and this viewpoint will eventually develop into an all-inclusive and holistic between people and nature. In Gnanankan's view, people often hold a sacred and secular division. The world is a place of secular activity and something negative. Therefore, some people naively think that any relationship with this world is 'kitsch', and any contact with this world will keep

us away from God. The most important thing is to establish a new heaven and a new earth. They claim that their sacred duty is to wait for God to show the new world to us. Thus, a major challenge for Christianity is to develop the correct relationship with God, and this can be achieved through the correct relationship with Jesus Christ (Gnanankan 5). Christianity needs to specifically bridge the negative space between the divisions of secular and sacred.

As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si*, the first step towards solving any problem is dialogue that aims to achieve the common good of all, where “[a]n integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics” (116). He also mentions that religions and people should be open to dialogue with each other “for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity” (147). It is important to have this space for dialogue and development of the ethical care. We are living in a society where we cannot sustain the life styles of consumption, instant gratification and consumerism, which has negatively impacted our concern for fellow human beings and for nature. In this regard, we need new lifestyles that are sustainable and at peace with nature and ourselves (Nandhikkara 403). Without these considerations, society would not be able to uplift fellow human beings by ending poverty, hunger, and indifference for each other, nor would it be able to sustainably and judiciously use the limited resources in nature. It is in this sense that the religious ecological care, especially within Christianity, provides a new understanding and ethical care to help people realize their responsibility towards both people and the planet.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this article, we have attempted to illustrate the ecological shift witnessed in Christianity, to reflect upon the need for religions to reflect, understand, and interpret the ecological problems. The primary concern of this article was to emphasize that an ethical care and concern is necessitates in the present times of environmental degradation. This degradation is primarily due to the excessive consumption and instant gratification that plague human lifestyles in the present day. Thus to develop a sustainable lifestyle that places a solidarity with nature and people, religions around the world must engage with the ecological crisis. Religion has to enable people with

ethical values and moral obligations that engage and empower them to move towards sustainable lifestyles.

In this context, this paper looked at the questions and criticisms raised by White, that consider the attitudes and philosophies underlying Christian thinking as the sole reason for the ecological crisis. However, this argument provides only a partial reasoning. White's analysis takes into account only a single variable in a time period that was proficiently understood by him. Moreover, it did not mention or criticize other factors responsible for the environmental degradation, but only referred to industrial revolution in passing. However, White emphasizes that what actions we take towards ecology will depend on the relationship between human and nature, which is very important in White's view. He believes that if we do not abandon the Christian view that the only reason for the existence of nature is to serve humankind, then the ecological crisis will continue to deteriorate.

Gnanankan also argues that Christian need to rethink the traditional Christian doctrine about the relationship between human and nature. In this respect, Christianity has urged for dialogue and made efforts to ethically engage with the ecological crisis. People must also establish a better political system to increase good deeds and reduce evil deeds. There is no evil and fault in nature, but the depravity of the situation should be blamed on the human system. Living according to nature and living a simple life will not lead to evil. Therefore, all kinds of human facilities and systems should be improved. The disadvantages of the system stem from deep-rooted fallacies in the world views. Over the past 100 years, human attitudes towards nature have been closely related to changes in philosophy and religion, especially those related to Western philosophy and religion. These two disciplines would also have to share the responsibility to develop an ethical awareness and concern among the people to sufficiently and effectively deal with ecological crisis.

In short, people must recognize the importance of ethics and values and world views in global issues; it has become the subject of the current debate and a key factor in solving global problems. Ecological issues have become the subject of moral issues. Modern people are rich in knowledge and poor in wisdom, the only place for hope is to awaken the sense of the ecological crisis, and then inspire people to take joint action. Individuals are the elements that make up

society. Individual behaviour, world outlook, and values can determine the operation and ethics of society. The improvement of human basic wisdom can only depend on the inner growth of everyone. At this point, what the great religionists have been diligently seeking for many centuries is to inspire people with a noble spiritual feeling. Science and technology can enrich people's material lives, but they may not necessarily make people see the meaning and value of life. Scientific and technological solutions are also "not enough for solving ecological crisis, though we cannot solve them without science either...It is a moral issue that which needs response from ethical and religious perspectives" (Nandhikkara 401). The value of life does not entirely depend on the abundance and enrichment of material wealth, rather it is the holistic understanding of the situation and wisdom that would guide us to better solutions and help us to uplift the planet and the people.

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